

REF 2: The Four Galenic Constitutional Types

A Reference Companion to the *At Charlemagne's Behest* Episode Series

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How to Use This Reference

This document is a working reference companion to the *At Charlemagne's Behest* (ACB) episode series on Galenic and Carolingian herbalism. It maps the four classical constitutional types—Sanguine, Choleric, Phlegmatic, and Melancholic—across their foundational Galenic attributes: element, humour, qualities, season, governing organ, associated age, observable signs, and general herbal approach.

The Galenic constitutional system is not a diagnostic tool in the modern medical sense. It is an observational framework for understanding a person's characteristic pattern of vitality, vulnerability, and response to plants. The herbalist's task is not to classify a client rigidly into one type, but to recognise the dominant terrain and understand how it shifts across seasons, life stages, and circumstances.

Cross-reference this document with **REF 1: The Capitulare de Villis Plant List** for Carolingian plant sources, and with the individual episode monographs for plant-specific constitutional applications.

Quick Reference: All Four Constitutions

Constitution	Element	Humour	Qualities	Season	Organ	Age
Sanguine	Air	Blood	Hot & Moist	Spring	Liver	Childhood
Choleric	Fire	Yellow Bile	Hot & Dry	Summer	Gallbladder	Youth
Phlegmatic	Water	Phlegm	Cold & Moist	Winter	Brain / Lungs	Maturity
Melancholic	Earth	Black Bile	Cold & Dry	Autumn	Spleen	Old Age

Note on qualities: Each constitution is defined by a primary pairing of qualities (hot/cold and moist/dry). These are tendencies, not absolutes. Galen and his successors acknowledged that most individuals carry a mixed constitution, with one type predominant.

The Sanguine Constitution

SANGUINE <i>complexio sanguinea</i>	
• Element	Air
• Humour	Blood
• Qualities	Hot and Moist
• Season	Spring — the season of increase and outward movement
• Governing Organ	Liver (primary seat of blood production and warmth)
• Associated Age	Childhood and early life; the time of growth, play, and exuberance

Character of Blood (sanguis): Blood is the most balanced of the four humours in Galenic thought—warm, moist, nourishing, and generative. It corresponds to the nutritive faculty and to the circulation of warmth and vitality through the body. An excess of blood does not mean disease; it means a tendency toward fullness, heat, and outward expression.

Signs of Sanguine Constitution	
Category	Observable Signs
Physical build	Often fleshy, well-proportioned, or tending to fullness; good colour; flesh warm and moist to the touch
Complexion	Ruddy, rosy, or florid; veins visible and full; good capillary flush
Pulse	Full, bounding, moderately fast; reflects vigorous circulation
Sleep & energy	Sleeps soundly and easily; energetic; naturally social and active
Digestion	Strong digestion; good appetite; may tend to overindulgence
Mood & temperament	Cheerful, sociable, optimistic, generous; can be expansive to the point of excess; enjoys pleasure and company
Voice & speech	Clear, warm, often loud or expressive; enjoys conversation
Urine (classical)	Full-coloured, warm, moderate in quantity
Seasonal tendency	Flourishes in spring; may feel congested or overstimulated in summer
Tongue (ACB note)	Moist, pink to red; coating minimal or thin white

Herbal Approach: Sanguine	
General principle	The Sanguine constitution has inherent vitality and resilience. Support is often about directing or moderating excess rather than supplementing deficiency.
When in balance	Little intervention needed. Tonic bitters support digestion; gentle circulatory herbs maintain flow without overheating.
Excess heat & moisture	Cooling, drying, dispersing herbs. Bitters are valuable—they clear heat, reduce congestion, and stimulate downward drainage. Avoid heavily warming preparations.

Stagnation pattern	If Sanguine energy stagnates (congestion, sluggish liver, fullness without expression): moving, mildly bitter, liver-supportive plants—dandelion root, burdock.
Seasonal support	Spring: gentle bitters, alteratives, cleansing herbs. Summer: cooling herbs if heat builds (elderflower, lemon balm).
Capitalulare plants (REF 1)	Dandelion (<i>Taraxacum</i>), fennel (<i>Foeniculum</i>), sage (<i>Salvia</i>)—all with bitter or dispersing actions relevant to Sanguine excess. See individual episode monographs.
Caution	Avoid overly warming or stimulating preparations in Sanguine excess states. Adaptogens that increase warmth and circulation may exacerbate plethoric tendency.

The Choleric Constitution

CHOLERIC <i>complexio choleric</i>	
• Element	Fire
• Humour	Yellow Bile (Cholera)
• Qualities	Hot and Dry
• Season	Summer — the season of peak intensity, heat, and activity
• Governing Organ	Gallbladder (primary site of yellow bile; liver also implicated)
• Associated Age	Youth and young adulthood; the time of ambition, drive, and competitive vitality

Character of Yellow Bile (cholera): Yellow bile is the thinnest and sharpest of the humours. In its natural state it aids digestion and is secreted with bile; in excess it produces heat, dryness, irritability, and inflammation. It corresponds to the digestive faculty and to the body's capacity for transformation and catabolism.

Signs of Choleric Constitution	
Category	Observable Signs
Physical build	Often lean, muscular, or wiry; body tends toward dryness; sinews prominent
Complexion	Olive, yellow-tinged, or sallow; skin may be dry or coarse; often tans easily
Pulse	Fast, wiry, forceful; reflects the driving quality of fire
Sleep & energy	Sleeps lightly or with difficulty; high energy but can exhaust quickly; driven
Digestion	Intense digestion; quick metabolism; prone to acid, heat in stomach, or irregular bowel

Mood & temperament	Decisive, focused, ambitious, irritable when crossed; can be confrontational; natural leader; quick to anger and quick to forgive
Voice & speech	Sharp, direct, often commanding; impatient in conversation
Urine (classical)	High-coloured, small in quantity, sharp-smelling
Seasonal tendency	May struggle in summer; dryness and heat exacerbate the constitution; autumn offers some relief
Tongue (ACB note)	Red-edged, dry or with thin yellow coating; may be pointed at tip

Herbal Approach: Choleric	
General principle	The Choleric constitution requires cooling and moistening support. Heat must be cleared; dryness must be addressed. Avoid further heating.
When in balance	Digestive bitters in small, controlled doses support the gallbladder's natural function. Nervines prevent reactive agitation from becoming entrenched.
Excess heat & dryness	Cooling, anti-inflammatory, moistening herbs. Demulcents (marshmallow, slippery elm) for dryness. Cooling bitters (dandelion leaf, chicory). Avoid hot, acrid, or stimulating herbs.
Liver-gallbladder support	Choleric types are especially susceptible to biliary excess. Cholagogue bitters (dandelion root, wormwood in small dose) support bile flow and prevent stagnation.
Nervous system	Easily over-stimulated. Cooling nervines (lemon balm, skullcap, chamomile) are often indicated. Avoid stimulating adaptogens.
Seasonal support	Summer: consistent cooling and hydrating herbs. Autumn: gentle warming transition. Avoid excess pungent herbs in spring.
Capitulare plants (REF 1)	Wormwood (<i>Artemisia absinthium</i> —see EP.3) used with caution as a bitter digestive; dandelion; fennel (cooling action). Sage (<i>Salvia</i> —see EP.2) appropriate in small doses; avoid excess.
Caution	Choleric clients can be resistant to gentle approaches. Heating herbs, excessive alcohol-based preparations, and highly pungent formulas may aggravate the pattern.

The Phlegmatic Constitution

PHLEGMATIC <i>complexio phlegmatica</i>	
• Element	Water
• Humour	Phlegm (Pituita)
• Qualities	Cold and Moist
• Season	Winter — the season of inwardness, dampness, and slow metabolic activity
• Governing Organ	Brain and Lungs (primary sites of phlegm production and distribution)

• Associated Age	Maturity and middle age; the time of consolidation, patience, and steady effort
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Character of Phlegm (pituita): Phlegm is cold and moist, associated with water and the nutritive and generative principles of the body. In its natural state it lubricates, cushions, and nourishes. In excess it produces sluggishness, congestion, dampness, and a tendency toward accumulation. The Phlegmatic type is often the most durable and long-lived of the four constitutions—but requires consistent support to maintain warmth and circulation.

Signs of Phlegmatic Constitution	
Category	Observable Signs
Physical build	Often heavy, rounded, or tending to retain fluid and fat; flesh soft and cool to the touch; joints and tissues well-lubricated
Complexion	Pale, cool, or whitish; skin often smooth; prone to puffiness or water retention
Pulse	Slow, soft, deep; may be difficult to feel at surface
Sleep & energy	Sleeps deeply and long; awakens slowly; energy builds gradually through the day; prone to fatigue if cold
Digestion	Slow digestion; tendency to fullness, sluggish bowel, excess mucus production; poor appetite in the morning
Mood & temperament	Patient, calm, steady, empathetic; can be stubborn or resistant to change; loyal; prone to inertia and melancholy when cold increases
Voice & speech	Soft, even, slow; may clear throat frequently; speech deliberate
Urine (classical)	Pale, copious, thin or watery
Seasonal tendency	Most challenged in winter; cold-moist overlap intensifies constitutional tendencies. Spring warmth is often welcome and beneficial.
Tongue (ACB note)	Pale, moist, enlarged or scalloped at edges; thick white or white-grey coating

Herbal Approach: Phlegmatic	
General principle	The Phlegmatic constitution requires warming, drying, and stimulating support. The primary goal is to kindle digestive fire (the Galenic innate heat) and move accumulations.
When in balance	Aromatic herbs support digestion and warmth. Gentle bitters stimulate bile flow and counter sluggish digestion. Movement and warmth are the Phlegmatic's best medicines.
Core approach	Warming aromatics (ginger, sage, thyme, rosemary); bitter digestive stimulants (wormwood—see EP.3—dandelion root, gentian); expectorants for respiratory phlegm (elecampane, horehound, hyssop).
Bitters & the Phlegmatic	Bitters are among the most valuable allies for Phlegmatic types. They stimulate the bitter T2R receptors, increase bile production, sharpen appetite, and counter the cold-damp tendency toward stagnation. See the ACB Bitters series for detail.
Seasonal support	Winter: consistent warming herbs, avoid cold and raw food. Spring: alteratives and gentle warming bitters to clear winter accumulation. Summer: moderate warming; adjust downward if heat becomes excessive.

Capitulare plants (REF 1)	Fennel (<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i> —see EP.5): warming, carminative, anti-phlegmatic. Sage (<i>Salvia</i> —see EP.2): hot/dry, directly counters phlegmatic tendency. Wormwood (EP.3): bitter, heating, digestive stimulant. Nettles (EP.7): nutritive, warming, diuretic, supports phlegm drainage.
Caution	Phlegmatic types can over-rely on warming stimulants and create a secondary dryness. Avoid excessive use of very hot, acrid herbs. Monitor for dryness in mucous membranes during heavy aromatic use.
Carolyn's note (ACB EP.4)	The Phlegmatic constitution is discussed in depth in ACB EP.4 (The Phlegmatic Constitution). This reference table is designed as a companion to that episode, not a replacement for the full clinical discussion therein.

The Melancholic Constitution

MELANCHOLIC <i>complexio melancholica</i>	
• Element	Earth
• Humour	Black Bile (Melancholia / Atra Bilis)
• Qualities	Cold and Dry
• Season	Autumn — the season of contraction, drying, and preparation for winter
• Governing Organ	Spleen (primary site of black bile production and regulation)
• Associated Age	Old age; the time of experience, reflection, and natural withdrawal of vitality

Character of Black Bile (atra bilis): Black bile is the heaviest and most potentially disruptive of the four humours. In its natural state it provides density, stability, and grounding to the body—the earthy quality that holds structure together. In excess, or when adust (overheated), it produces coldness, dryness, anxiety, fear, despondency, and a tendency toward rigidity and hardening. The Melancholic type is often highly perceptive, detail-oriented, and capable of great depth—but requires careful support to prevent cold and stagnation from accumulating.

Signs of Melancholic Constitution	
Category	Observable Signs
Physical build	Often lean, angular, or thin; tissue tends to be dry and firm; bones and tendons prominent
Complexion	Dark, sallow, or greyish; skin often dry or rough; dark circles common; may have a sunken quality
Pulse	Slow, hard, small; tense or wiry at times; difficult to assess
Sleep & energy	Often disturbed or insufficient sleep; prone to anxiety at night; energy erratic—can be intensely focused then depleted

Digestion	Erratic or anxious digestion; prone to constipation and dryness; poor absorption; irregular appetite
Mood & temperament	Thoughtful, analytical, perceptive, creative; prone to worry, fear, and despondency; prefers solitude and depth to social stimulation; can be rigid or inflexible under stress
Voice & speech	Quiet, careful, precise; may speak slowly or with long pauses; reluctant to speak impulsively
Urine (classical)	Dark, scanty, sometimes turbid
Seasonal tendency	Most challenged in autumn—the season of black bile. Winter further cools and dries. Spring and early summer are often the most comfortable seasons.
Tongue (ACB note)	Dry, pale or dark-edged, thin or cracked; coating may be absent in dryness states, or dark and thin

Herbal Approach: Melancholic	
General principle	The Melancholic constitution requires warming, moistening, and gently moving support. The goal is to soften rigidity, restore moisture, and support a nervous system prone to fearfulness and over-analysis.
When in balance	Gentle tonics maintain moisture and warmth. Nervines prevent anxiety from entrenching. Digestive support addresses the characteristic coldness and dryness of the gut.
Core approach	Gentle warming herbs (not aggressively hot): chamomile, lemon balm, fennel, caraway. Moistening herbs: marshmallow, violet, oats (milky oat tops). Nervous system support: St John's Wort (where appropriate), skullcap, lemon balm. Spleen tonics: historically, spleen-supportive bitters (wormwood, gentian) to prevent black bile accumulation.
Bitters & the Melancholic	Bitters must be used with care in Melancholic types—many are cold and dry, which can exacerbate the constitution. Prefer warming bitters (fennel, caraway, chamomile) over cold bitters (dandelion leaf, gentian in excess). Wormwood in small, warming dose with fennel balances the formula.
Spleen support	The spleen is the Galenic seat of Melancholic excess. Herbs that support the spleen and regulate black bile production include: dandelion root, artichoke leaf, and gentle liver-supportive plants.
Seasonal support	Autumn: consistent warming and moistening support; avoid cold, raw, and drying foods. Winter: gentle warming; protect from cold. Spring: slowly introduce more movement and stimulation.
Capitular plants (REF 1)	Fennel (EP.5): warming, carminative, anti-spasmodic—excellent for Melancholic cold dryness. Sage (EP.2): warming, but use carefully—can increase dryness in excess. Nettles (EP.7): nutritive, warming, supportive of tissue moisture.
Caution	Avoid highly drying herbs in Melancholic excess (excess sage, thyme in large doses, astringents without compensating moisture). Cold, bitter, strongly purgative preparations may worsen the constitution. The Melancholic type is most susceptible to iatrogenic aggravation from overly drying formulas.

Mixed and Compound Constitutions

No individual is a pure constitutional type. Galen himself emphasised that most people present as mixtures, with one type predominant and others present in varying degrees. A person may be primarily Phlegmatic with a secondary Melancholic tendency, or Sanguine with Choleric edges that emerge under stress or in summer.

The practical task is to identify the dominant terrain, note the secondary tendency, and observe how both shift with season, age, diet, and circumstance. The working formula always addresses the current state of the person, not the constitutional type in the abstract.

Mixed & Compound Constitutions: Working Principles	
Hot-Moist excess	Sanguine tendency: dispersing, lightening, drying herbs; modulate with bitters
Hot-Dry excess	Choleric tendency: cooling, moistening herbs; bitters + demulcents; avoid pungent/heating
Cold-Moist excess	Phlegmatic tendency: warming, drying, stimulating circulation; aromatics, bitters, pungents
Cold-Dry excess	Melancholic tendency: warming, moistening, moving stagnation; nervines, gentle bitters, tonics
Dual excess (e.g., Hot + Dry)	Both qualities must be addressed; choose herbs that cool AND moisten; avoid single-action correction
Seasonal overlay	Constitutional base + seasonal humour = working terrain. E.g., Phlegmatic constitution in winter: doubly cold-moist; extra warming support needed

The Innate Heat and Radical Moisture

Two concepts underlie all Galenic constitutional assessment: the **innate heat** (*calor innatus*) and the **radical moisture** (*humidum radicale*).

Innate heat is the vital fire seated in the heart. It is the animating principle of life—distinct from elemental fire and from body temperature as measured externally. Its strength determines vitality, digestive capacity, and the body’s ability to transform food into the four humours. When innate heat diminishes, metabolism slows, digestion weakens, and cold constitutions deteriorate. Warming herbs primarily act to sustain or restore innate heat.

Radical moisture is the original vital fluid, distinct from acquired moisture (water, phlegm). It is the constitutional substrate of life itself. It cannot be replaced once consumed, but it can be supported and preserved through diet, rest, moderate exercise, and appropriate moistening herbs. When radical moisture is depleted (through illness, excess heat, ageing, or constitutional dryness), the body becomes brittle, dry, and accelerated toward decline. Preserving radical moisture is one of the central concerns of Galenic longevity medicine.

These concepts are addressed in ACB EP.4 (The Phlegmatic Constitution) and will be developed further in the forthcoming ACB article on salt, moisture, and the humoral body.

Constitutional Herbalism and the Capitulare de Villis

The *Capitulare de Villis* (c. 812 CE), Charlemagne's estate management document, lists 74 plants required to be grown on the royal domains. These plants were not selected randomly: they reflect a working Galenic herbal pharmacopoeia of the Carolingian period, informed by the monastic transmission of Galen, Dioscorides, and the *Regimen Sanitatis* tradition.

When mapped against the four constitutional types, the *Capitulare* plants reveal a Carolingian understanding of constitutional herbalism that aligns closely with the Galenic texts being copied and studied at the same period. The ACB Reference Series (REF 1 and REF 2) is designed to make this mapping explicit and usable for contemporary Galenic practitioners.

See **REF 1: The Capitulare de Villis Plant List** for the full annotated plant list, and individual ACB episode monographs for constitution-specific plant profiles.

A Note on Astrological Herbalism

The medieval and early modern Galenic tradition did not separate constitutional herbalism from astrology. Each humour corresponds to a planet and a sign; each plant carries planetary rulership that determines its constitutional application. The ACB series approaches this dimension with historical integrity: the astrological framework is treated as a living epistemological system, not a decorative curiosity.

A full ACB article on the astrological dimensions of Galenic constitutional typing is in preparation. In the meantime, the constitutional qualities mapped in this document provide the foundation from which astrological plant selection proceeds.

Further Reading

Primary sources: Galen of Pergamon, *De Temperamentis*; Galen, *On the Natural Faculties*; Pseudo-Apuleius, *Herbarius*; Walafrid Strabo, *Hortulus* (c. 840 CE).

Secondary sources: Temkin, O., *Galenism: Rise and Decline of a Medical Philosophy* (1973); Siraisi, N.G., *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine* (1990); Voigts, L.E. and McVaugh, M.R., "A Latin Technical Phlebotomy and Its Middle English Translation," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 74 (1984).

ACB episodes (cross-reference): EP.1 (Constitutional Intro), EP.2 (Sage), EP.3 (Wormwood), EP.4 (Phlegmatic Constitution), EP.5 (Fennel), EP.6 (Hildegard's Bridge), EP.7 (Nettle). REF 1 (Capitulare de Villis Plant List).
