The Romans were excellent builders, soldiers and administrators, but they produced very few scientists, philosophers and doctors. Not surprisingly, therefore, the most famous doctor in the Roman Empire was a Greek, Claudius Galen.

Who was Galen?
Galen was a Greek doctor, who studied in Egypt and returned to Greece in 157 where he was appointed physician to the gladiators. This was an ideal place to practise medicine, as there were many injuries. In AD 162 Galen went to Rome to become a doctor to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

How did he develop his ideas?
Galen was influenced by Hippocrates’s idea of the Four Humours (the theory that the body was made up of four liquids, blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile). He developed this by introducing the idea of using opposites to treat illnesses. For example, if a patient had a fever this was believed to be the result of too much yellow bile in the body. As a way of treating this, Galen would suggest that the patient drink lots of cool liquid and eat cold foods. Being a doctor at a gladiator school gave Galen the opportunity to develop his interest in anatomy and skills as a surgeon. Galen dissected pigs, goats and apes and applied what he had learnt to the human body. For example he realised the importance of the spinal cord and how if it were cut there would be no movement from the part of the body below the cut.

Medical changes
Galen’s ideas dominated medicine throughout the Middle Ages. He discovered that blood moved in the body, although he did not know that it circulated. Medical students studied his descriptions of operations, including a tracheotomy to cure breathing difficulties, long after his death. To help with the diagnosis of patients, Galen took their pulse, a practice that is still used today. Galen’s drawing of the heart was studied by doctors until the 16th century.

How important was Galen?
Galen’s books were used at training schools for doctors until the Renaissance. Even though some doctors questioned his theories, the Catholic Church prevented Galen being challenged in this period, as his theories of anatomy fitted in with their belief in a system ordained by nature.