

Mystical Practices of Alchemy



The language of secret symbols has always hidden alchemy from the curiosity of the uninitiated. We still do not actually know alchemy's true nature: for some it is the making of gold from other metals, for others – finding the elixir of immortality, and select groups throughout history have tried to accomplish complete transformation of the human body and soul.

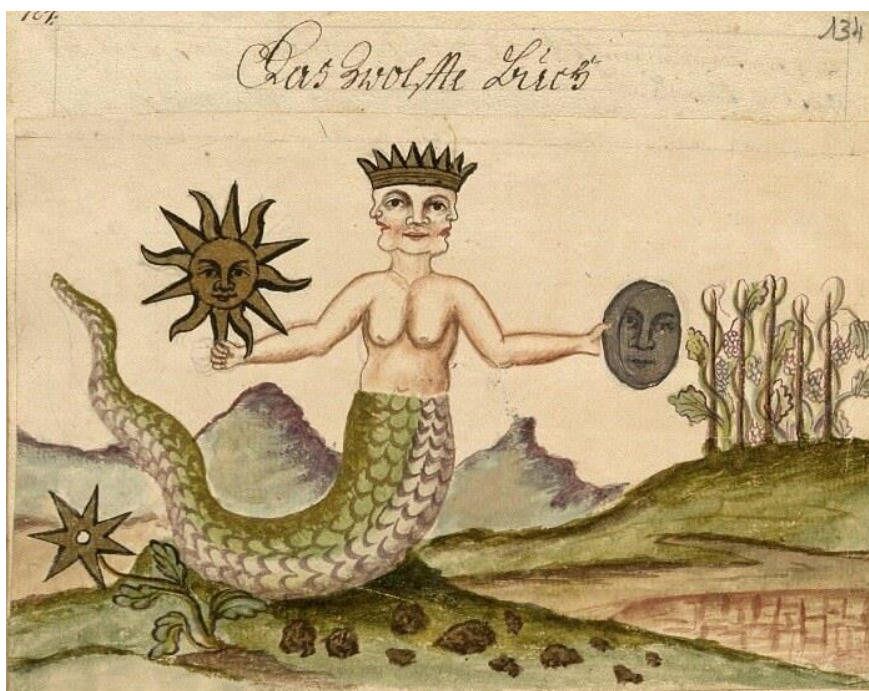
Royal art

Alchemy is the mother of chemistry. It is in alchemical laboratories that for the first time scientists obtained sulfur, nitric and hydrochloric acid, saltpeter, lead, and many drugs.



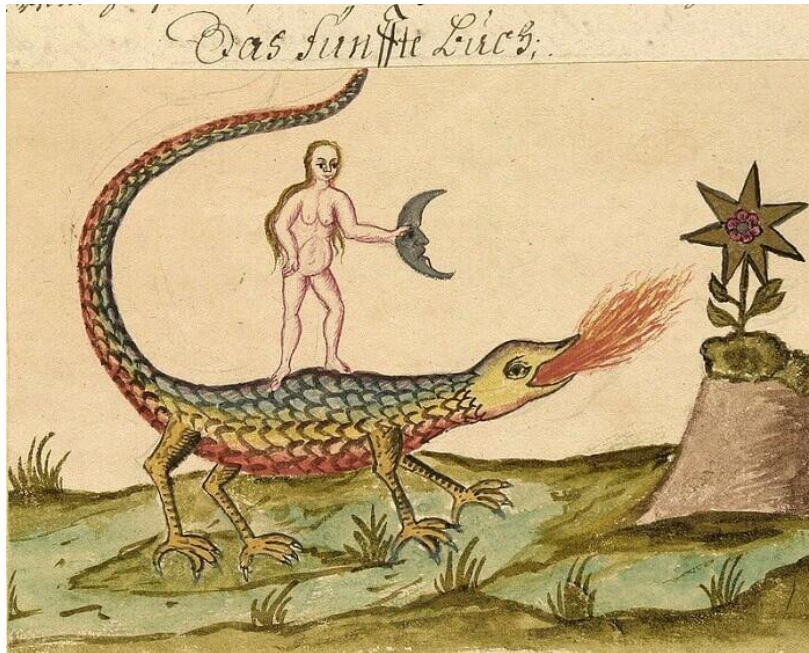
Medieval alchemists set very specific tasks. One of the European heads of alchemy, Rodger Bacon (13th century) wrote the following: “Alchemy is the science of how to prepare a compound or elixir, which, if added to base metals will transform them into sophisticated metals.”

By transforming base metals into precious, alchemy challenges nature itself.



Even though in Medieval Europe alchemy was practically illegal, many religious and secular people patronized it depending on hoping to get the “contemptible metal”. Not only did they patronize it, they actually practiced it themselves. Alchemy became a real “royal art”.

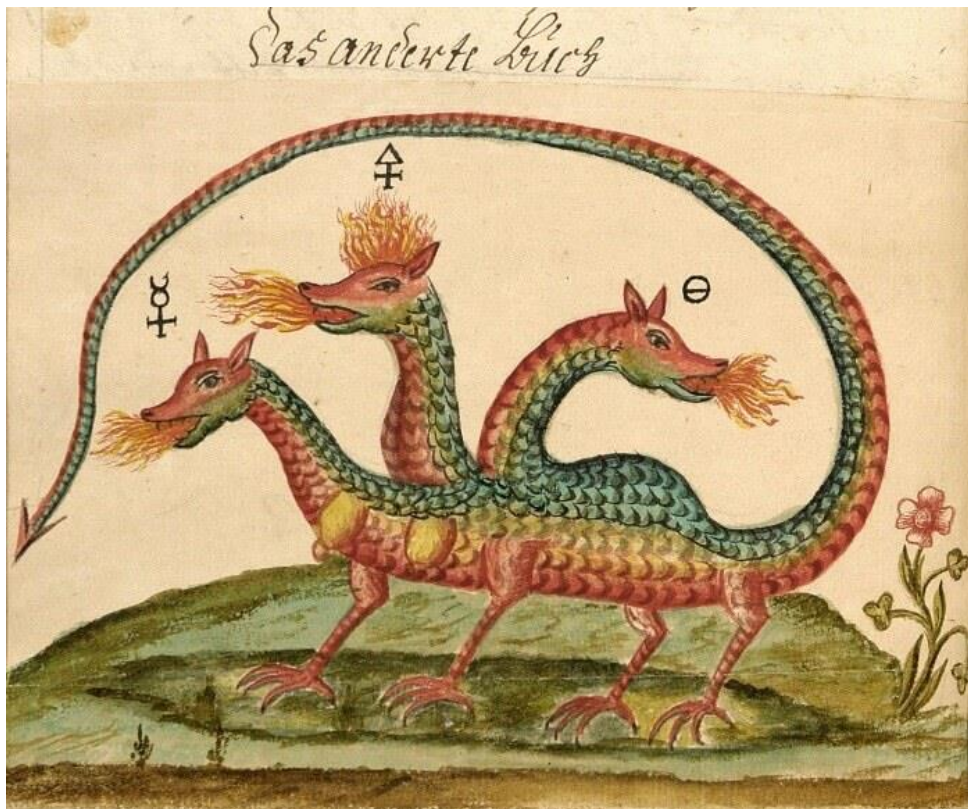
Augustus II the Strong (1670-1733) whose claim of the Polish crown required significant resources transformed Dresden into the true capital of alchemy. For the purpose of filling the national treasury with gold, he brought the talented alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger. To what extent did Böttger succeed in filling the treasury with gold, history remains silent. Alchemists in Europe were a lot, but the adepts – the ones who knew the secret of the Philosopher’s stone – were very few.



The language of symbols

The roots of alchemy lead to Hermeticism – science with traditions of ancient Greek natural philosophy, Chaldean astrology and Persian magic. Hence, the enigmatic and ambiguous language in alchemical treatises. Metals in alchemy were not just substances but the embodiment of cosmic order.

That’s why in alchemy manuscripts gold turns into Sun; silver into Moon, quicksilver into Mercury, lead into Saturn, calcium into Jupiter, iron into Mars, and copper into Venus.



The choice of these seven celestial objects is not accidental. The week is a sign of completion and perfection, the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, evidence of magical powers, and guardian of secrets.

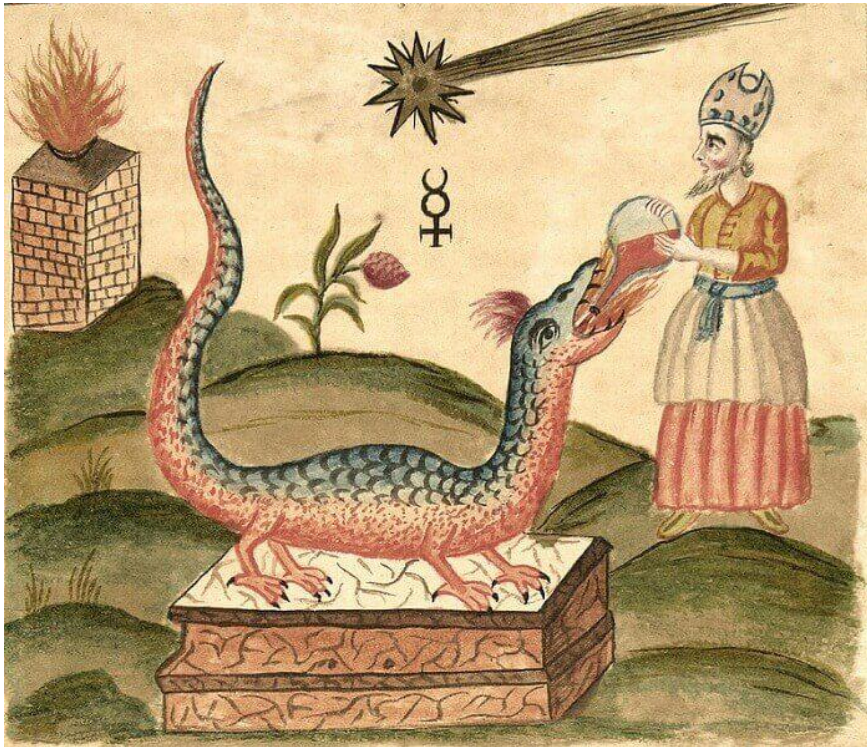
The recipes, recorded in the hermetic treatises seem mysterious, too. English alchemist, George Ripley (15th century) proposed to inflame mercury until it transforms into initially green and then into red lion for the creation of the sages' elixir. He suggests the emerging fluids to be mixed resulting in „tasteless mucus, alcohol and red drops”.

Later on, it becomes even more blurry. “Cimmerian shadows cover the retort with its pale veil. It burns and takes a magnificent lemon color and again produces the green lion. Make sure that he eats its tail, and again distill the product. At the end, my son, carefully rectify and you will see the emergence of hot water and human blood.” How to transform the symbolic alchemical word into a practical living reality?

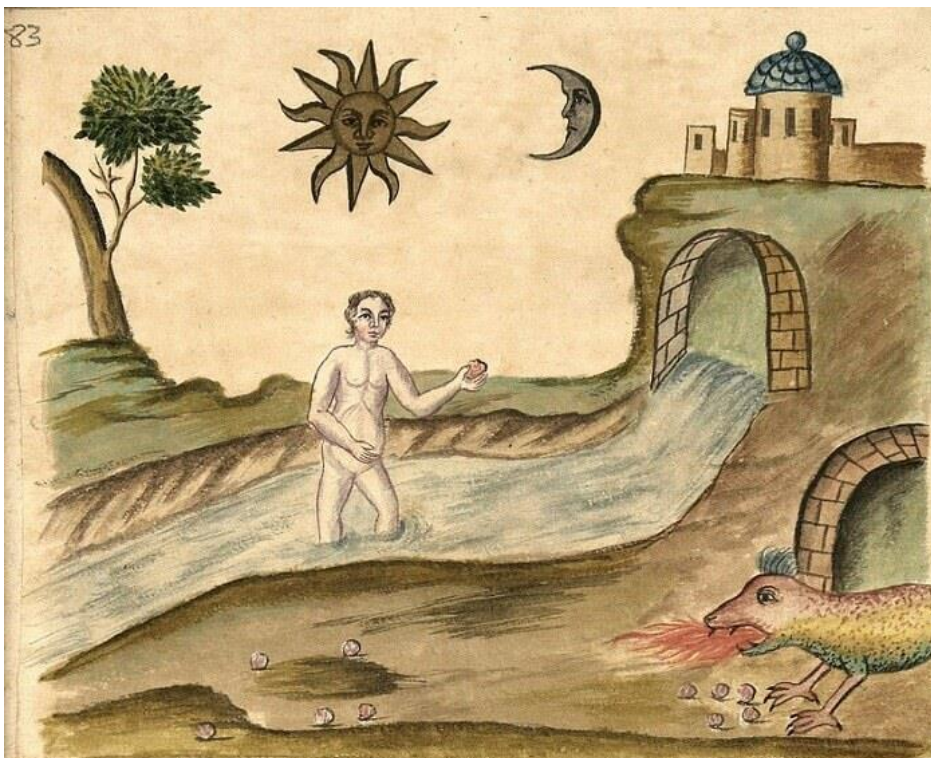


Some attempted, but they understood it literally. For example, Jeanne d’Arc’s ally, the famous Marshal Gilles de Rais came to killing babies for their young blood that was considered necessary for the success of the great cause.

Philosopher, Artephius left a message to the descendants who would want to lift the veil of alchemy’s secrets: “You miserable fool! How can you be so naïve to think and believe that we will teach you, so openly and clearly to one of the greatest and most important secret of ours?” The hermetic symbolism had the task to hide forever the secrets from the uninitiated.



19th century scholars managed to unravel the alchemists' allegory. What does the "lion" that had eaten the sun means? That is a process of gold being dissolved into mercury. The recipe of Ripley was also deciphered – it describes the procedure for obtaining acetone. In fact, chemist Nicolas Lemery noticed that he made this experiment many times but he never got the red drops – the substance, which according to adepts possessed the properties of the Philosopher's stone. The chemical extract had been extracted but the alchemical miracle was not performed.



Alchemical symbolism is more than a reflection of chemical processes. For example, one of the main symbols of alchemy – a dragon that swallowed its tale – is an embodiment of the multiple processes of birth and death. Symbolical language of sacred texts is connected not only to technologies but also to all structures of existence, the balance of which could lead to success in alchemical transformations.



The Philosopher's stone

The central element of alchemy is the Philosopher's stone or elixir that could turn base metals to precious ones. It was shown not only in the form of a stone – it could also be dust or liquid.

Some adepts left us a recipe for its preparation. Albert the Great, for example, suggests the usage of mercury, arsenic, silver slag and ammonium chloride as ingredients. All the components go through purification, mixing, heating, and the product should transform into “white solid and clear substance, similar in form to a crystal”.



The Philosopher's stone was not only able to transmute metals – Medieval and Renaissance alchemists attributed to the elixir the power to grow gems, growth stimulation of plants, healing any diseases, prolonging life and even eternal youth.

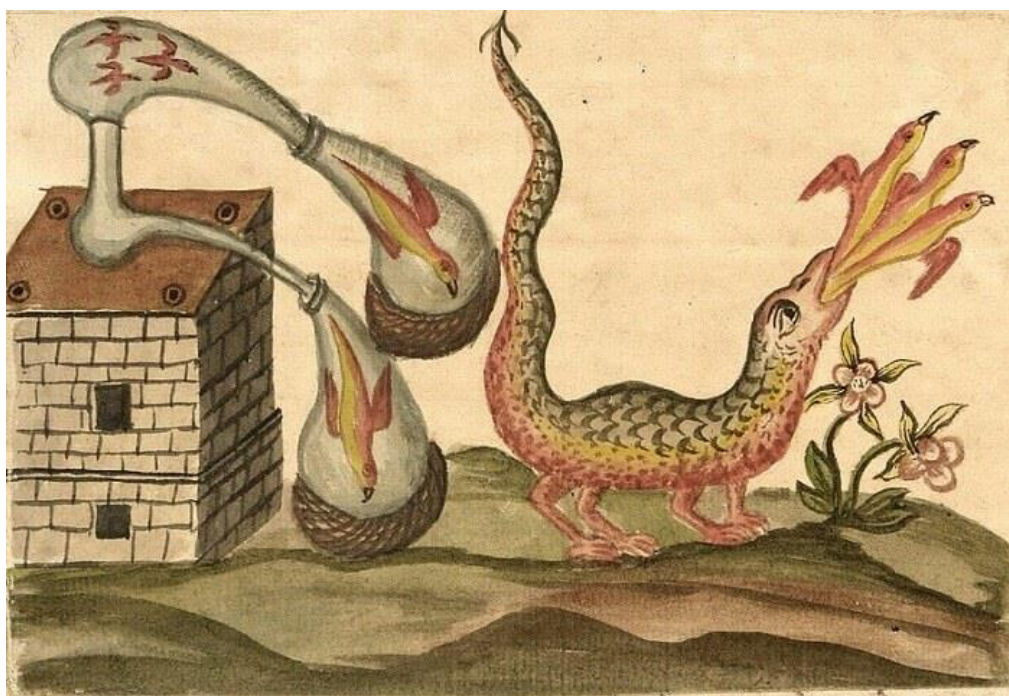


14th century French alchemist, Nicolas Flamel was one of the artisans that allegedly managed to obtain the Philosopher's stone. After introduced to the treatise of Abraham the Jew, Flamel devoted his whole life to decrypting the "key" left there. In the end, he discovered it and, according to the legends, he achieved immortality.

Is alchemy a science?



The church believed that alchemy was a source of superstition and obscurantism. For Dante Alighieri alchemy was “a science that is completely deceitful and useless”. Even Avicenna was skeptical about the Hermetic mysteries. He claimed that “alchemists can only do excellent imitations – painting the red metal white – then it becomes like silver, or to painting it yellow – then it becomes like gold”.



During 4th century BC, Aristotle wrote that copper mixed with zinc or lead forms a golden-yellow alloy. Often the alchemical experiment was considered successful if the base metal acquired the color of the precious one. However, there is some indirect evidence that, alchemists were in fact able to produce gold, with qualities not inferior to the natural metal.



In 14th century the English king Edward II ordered the Catalan alchemist Raymond Lully – 60 000 pounds of gold, as he provided mercury, lead and tin. It is unknown whether Lully managed to do the job but historical documents testify that under the signing of great deals, English men started to use golden coins in amounts significantly exceeding the gold reserves of the country.

