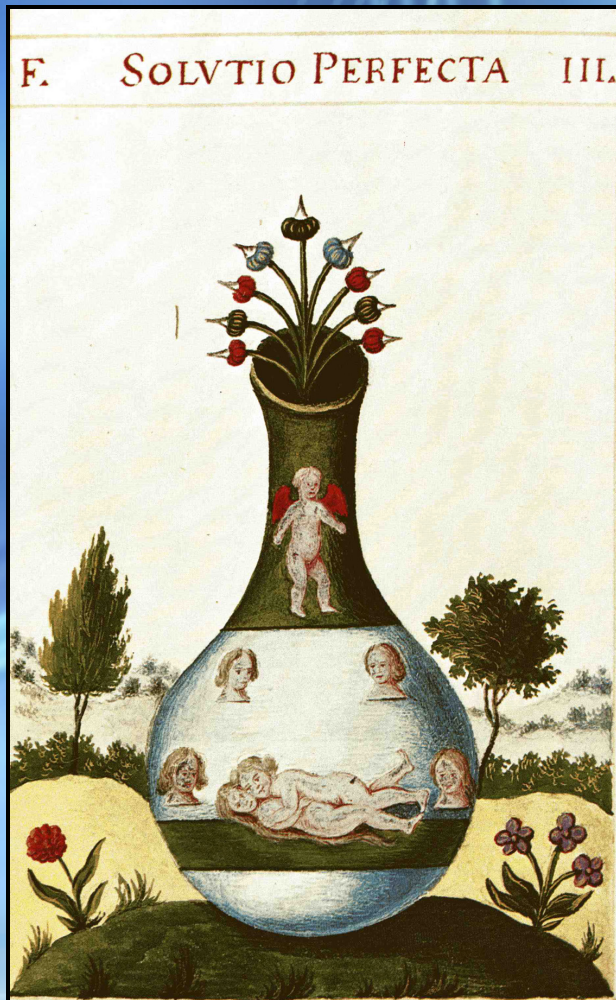




The 'Perfect Solution': the uniting of sulphur and mercury (Sol and Luna) produces the divine child, the *lapis philosophorum* or Philosophers' Stone, synonymous with alchemical 'gold' or spiritual transformation

Alchemy

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The origins of alchemy

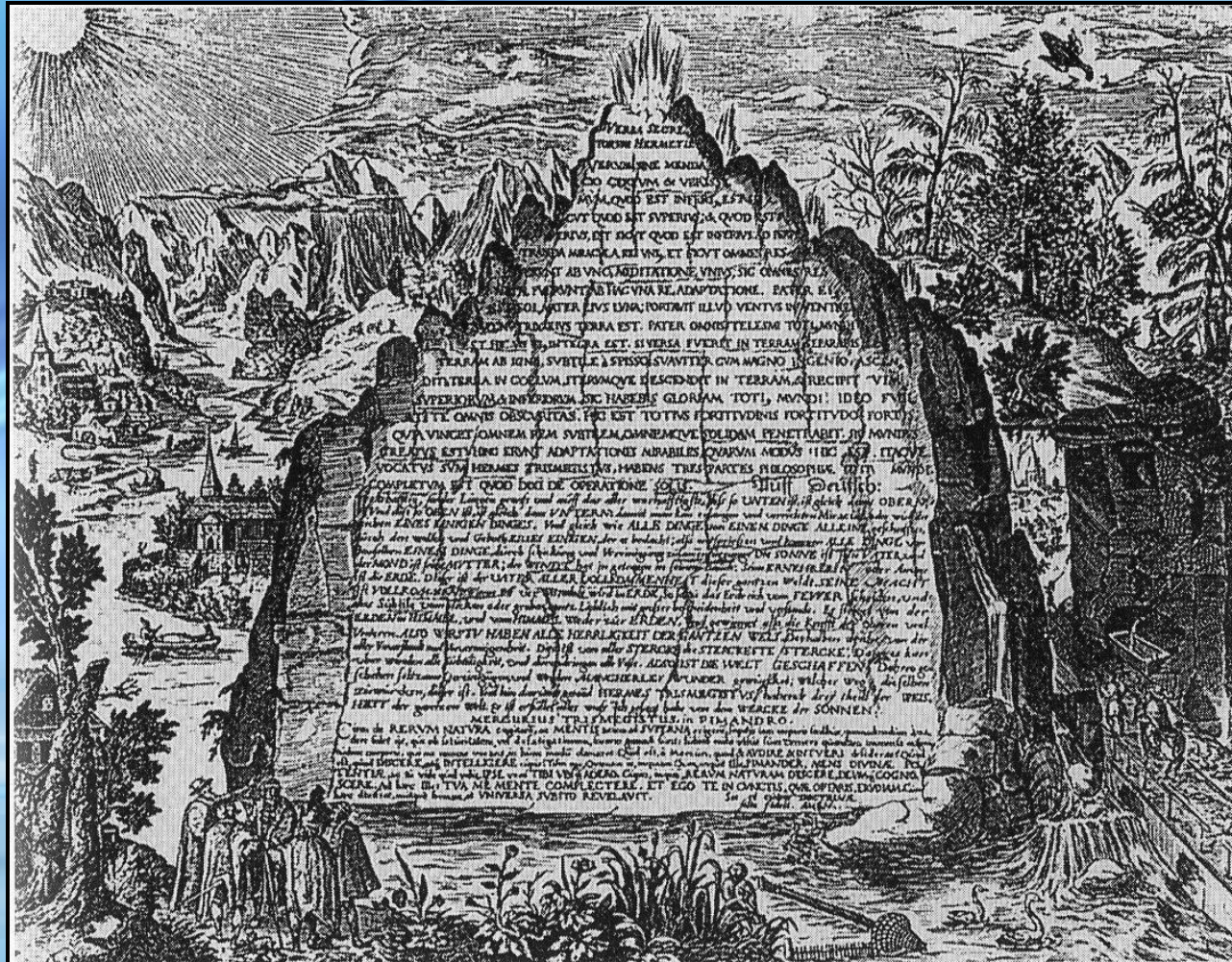
- Western alchemy seems to have arisen in Hellenistic Egypt in the last two centuries BCE, but it did not come to flower until the first two to three centuries CE. It may be viewed as the hybrid child of Egyptian metallurgy and embalming techniques and Greek Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy. It first appears in textual references related to Hermetic currents, and many Hermetic texts involve references to alchemy. Hermetic alchemy was adopted and developed in the Arab world after the Muslim conquest of Egypt in the 7th century, and arrived back in the West in the 12th to 13th centuries, contemporary with the emergence of Kabbalah and the growth of Western interest in astrology and magic.
- Alchemy is a syncretic current, combining practical techniques of the transformation of metals with a coherent cosmological system involving the transformation of the human being and the fate of the soul. Many different religious and philosophical concepts were incorporated as alchemy developed, including Gnostic dualism, the Stoic idea of sympathies or correspondences, and early Jewish and Greco-Egyptian ideas of the ascent of the soul through the planetary heavens and the human capacity to intervene and affect an alteration or transformation of astral fate.
- By the early modern period, alchemy was understood to be one of the three great 'occult' sciences of antiquity, along with astrology and magic. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's great Renaissance work, *De occulta philosophia*, is a comprehensive practical manual discussing all three of these 'occult' sciences and their interrelationships. Alchemy has always been associated with astrology, as the seven metals of alchemy were understood to be the earthly embodiments of the seven planets and their archons or angelic/daimonic rulers. Alchemy has also always been associated with magic, as it involves the application of the human will to establish and transform the system of bonds and relationships between revealed and unrevealed worlds.

The *Tabula smaragdina* or 'Emerald Tablet' of Hermes Trismegistus

[translation by Isaac Newton, found among his alchemical papers; see 'Newton's Commentary on the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus', in I. Merkel and A. G. Debus, *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, 1988. The earliest source for the text is from an Arabic text of the 7th century called *Kitab Ustuqus al-Uss al-Thani* by Jabir ibn Hayyan]

1. Tis true without lying, certain most true.
2. That which is below is like that which is above that which is above is like that which is below to do the miracles of one only thing.
3. And as all things have been arose from one by the mediation of one: so all things have their birth from this one thing by adaptation.
4. The Sun is its father, the moon its mother,
5. the wind hath carried it in its belly, the earth its nurse.
6. The father of all perfection in the whole world is here.
7. Its force or power is entire if it be converted into earth. Separate thou the earth from the fire, the subtle from the gross sweetly with great industry.
8. It ascends from the earth to the heaven again it descends to the earth and receives the force of things superior and inferior.
9. By this means ye shall have the glory of the whole world thereby all obscurity shall fly from you.
10. Its force is above all force, for it vanquishes every subtle thing and penetrates every solid thing. So was the world created.
11. From this are and do come admirable adaptations whereof the means (or process) is here in this.
12. Hence I am called Hermes Trismegist, having the three parts of the philosophy of the whole world.
13. That which I have said of the operation of the Sun is accomplished and ended.

The *Tabula smaragdina*
as portrayed by the alchemist Heinrich Khunrath in *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* (1606)



Timeline of Western alchemy

Influences and expressions from the Hellenistic period to late antiquity (4th century BCE - 8th century CE)

- Gnosticism
- Greek magical papyri
- Platonic, Neoplatonic, Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy
- Hermeticism (e.g. *Corpus Hermeticum*)
- Jewish mysticism (*heikhalot* and apocalyptic literature)
- Hellenistic astrology
- Orphic/Pythagorean philosophy
- Egyptian metallurgy and embalming techniques
- Greek scientific and cosmological theories

Influences and expressions from the medieval period (9th century -15th century)

- Arab Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophies
- Arab and Jewish astrology (e.g. Avicenna, Albumashar, Abraham ibn Ezra)
- Ramon Lull
- Sufi mysticism
- Jewish Kabbalah
- Christian theology (sins and virtues)
- Solomonian magical grimoires
- Ptolemaic astrology

Timeline of Western alchemy (continued)

Influences and expressions in the early modern period (late 15th century onward)

- Renaissance astrology and magic
- Renaissance Neoplatonic, Neopythagorean and Hermetic philosophies
- Jewish and 'Christian' Kabbalah and Kabbalistic magic
- Marsilio Ficino
- Henry Cornelius Agrippa
- Paracelsus and his followers
- Christian Knorr von Rosenroth's *Kabbala denudata*
- Rosicrucian spiritual alchemy (e.g. *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*)

Influences and expressions in the 19th century occult revival

- Eliphas Lévi
- Mary Ann Atwood
- Jewish Kabbalah
- 'Christian' Kabbalah
- H. P. Blavatsky
- A. E. Waite
- Rudolph Steiner
- Theosophical astrology (e.g. Alan Leo) and magical astrology (e.g. Aleister Crowley and Dion Fortune)

Hellenistic alchemy and the ascent of the soul

Corpus Hermeticum I.24-26, 'Poimandres'

(c. 1st-2nd century CE)

'First, in releasing the material body you give the body itself over to alteration, and the form that you used to have vanishes. To the demon you give over your temperament, now inactive. The body's senses rise up and flow back to their particular sources, becoming separate parts and mingling again with the energies. And feeling and longing go on toward irrational nature.

'Thence the human being rushes up through the cosmic framework, at the first zone [**Moon**] surrendering the energy of increase and decrease; at the second [**Mercury**] evil machination, a device now inactive; at the third [**Venus**] the illusion of longing, now inactive; at the fourth [**Sun**] the ruler's arrogance, now freed of excess; at the fifth [**Mars**] unholy presumption and daring recklessness; at the sixth [**Jupiter**] the evil impulses that come from wealth, now inactive; and at the seventh zone [**Saturn**] the deceit that lies in ambush.

'And then, stripped of the effects of the cosmic framework, the human enters the region of the ogdoad [**the fixed stars**]; he has his own proper power, and along with the blessed he hymns the father. Those present there rejoice together in his presence, and, having become like his companions, he also hears certain powers that exist beyond the ogdoadic region and hymn god with sweet voice. They rise up to the father in order and surrender themselves to the powers, and, having become powers, they enter into god. This is the final good for those who have received knowledge: to be made god.'

– Trans. Brian P. Copenhaver, in *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English translation with notes and introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 1992)

Early modern spiritual alchemy

Paracelsus on the Spirits of the Planets

- i. First and chiefly, the principle subject of this Art is fire, which always exists in one and the same property and mode of operation, nor can it receive its life from anything else...The sun receives light from no other source than God Himself, Who rules it, so that in the sun God Himself is burning and shining. Just so is it with this Art.
- ii. It now remains to speak of a manifold spirit or fire which is cause of variety or diversity of creatures, so that not one can be found exactly like another and identical in every part. This may be seen in the case of metals where no one has another exactly like itself. **The Sun produces gold; the Moon another and widely different metal, namely silver; Mars, another, namely iron; Jupiter, tin; Venus, copper; and Saturn, yet another, namely, lead; so that all these are unlike.**
- iii. The spirit or tincture of Sol took its beginning from a pure, subtle, and perfect fire, for which reason it far surpasses all the other spirits and tinctures of the metals. It remains constantly and fixed in the fire, nor does it fly therefrom, nor is consumed by it, but rather by its agency it becomes clearer, purer, and more beautiful...It will not only restore and preserve from weaknesses one who uses it, but also conserve him for a long and healthy life.
- iv. It remains to put forward something about the tincture of Luna, and of the White Tincture which, in like manner, is produced from the perfect spirit, though it be less perfect than the spirit of Sol; but, nevertheless, it excels in purity and subtlety all the other tinctures of the metals which follow it in order...It does not acquire rust, nor is it consumed in the fire like the other metals...And it not only preserves health, but causes long life, and cures diseases and infirmities, even those which are beyond its own special grade.



Theophrastus Bombastus von
Hohenheim, a.k.a. Paracelsus
(1493-1541)

- v. Now we proceed to speak of a red spirit, which is produced from a thick elemental mixture of the former [White Tincture of Luna]...Venus has this force and property...It preserves wounds in such a way that no accident can affect them, nor can the air or the water injure them. It also drives away all such diseases as are under its degree. This spirit further breaks up the bodies of metals so that they lose their malleability.
- vi. Speaking of the spirit of Mars, this comes from a more dense and combustible mixture of the elements...Mars is furnished with greater hardness than the other metals...True, it is hurt by the water and the air more than they are...Its spirit is less perfect than that of any of the above. But in hardness and dryness it exceeds all the metals above or below. For not only does it render the perfect metals, Sol and Luna, proof against the hammer, but even those which rank below itself, as Jupiter, Saturn, and the like...When it is used and applied for wounds which do not exceed its degree, it is of powerful cleansing qualities.
- vii. Concerning the spirit of Jupiter...it is derived from the white and pale substance of fire, together with a nature of peculiar crepitation and fragility, not malleable like Mars. It, therefore, heats other metals, and renders them capable of being broken with hammers...If it produces this effect in the bodies of metals, it will do the same in human bodies. In these it corrodes the limbs with severe burnings and decay...Nevertheless this spirit has in it the virtue of removing cancer, fistulas, and other similar ulcers.
- viii. The spirit of Saturn is concrete and formed from a dry, dark, cold admixture of elements....When, however, Sol and Luna have to be proved and purified, Saturn is added to them, and this has the effect of thoroughly purging them...Being mixed with cold, it cannot act mildly. It has the very greatest powers and virtues, whereby it cures fistulas, cancer, and similar ulcers. It drives the same kind of diseases from man as it expels impurities from Luna.
- ix. The spirit of Mercury, which is only subjected to the spirits above, has no determinate or certain form in itself. Hence it happens that it admits every metal, just as wax receives all seals, of whatever form. So this dense elementary spirit may be compared to the other spirits of the metals...The common Mercury is inconstant and volatile.

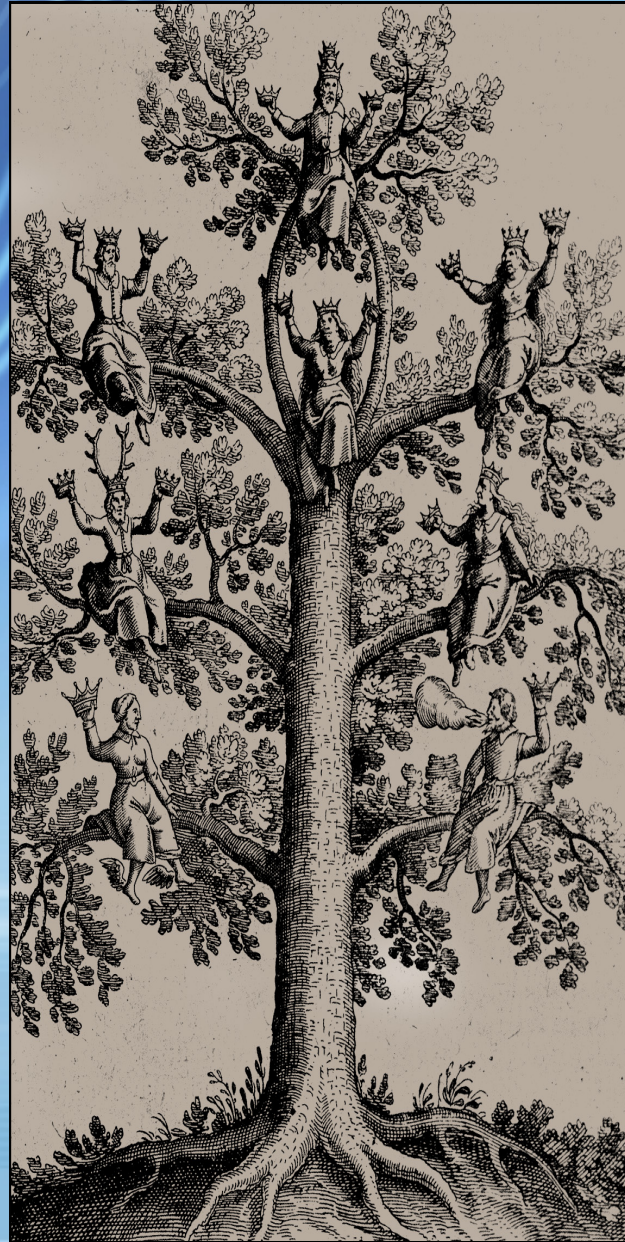
The alchemical opus in macrocosm and microcosm

- Johann Daniel Mylius, *Opus medico-chymicum* (1618)



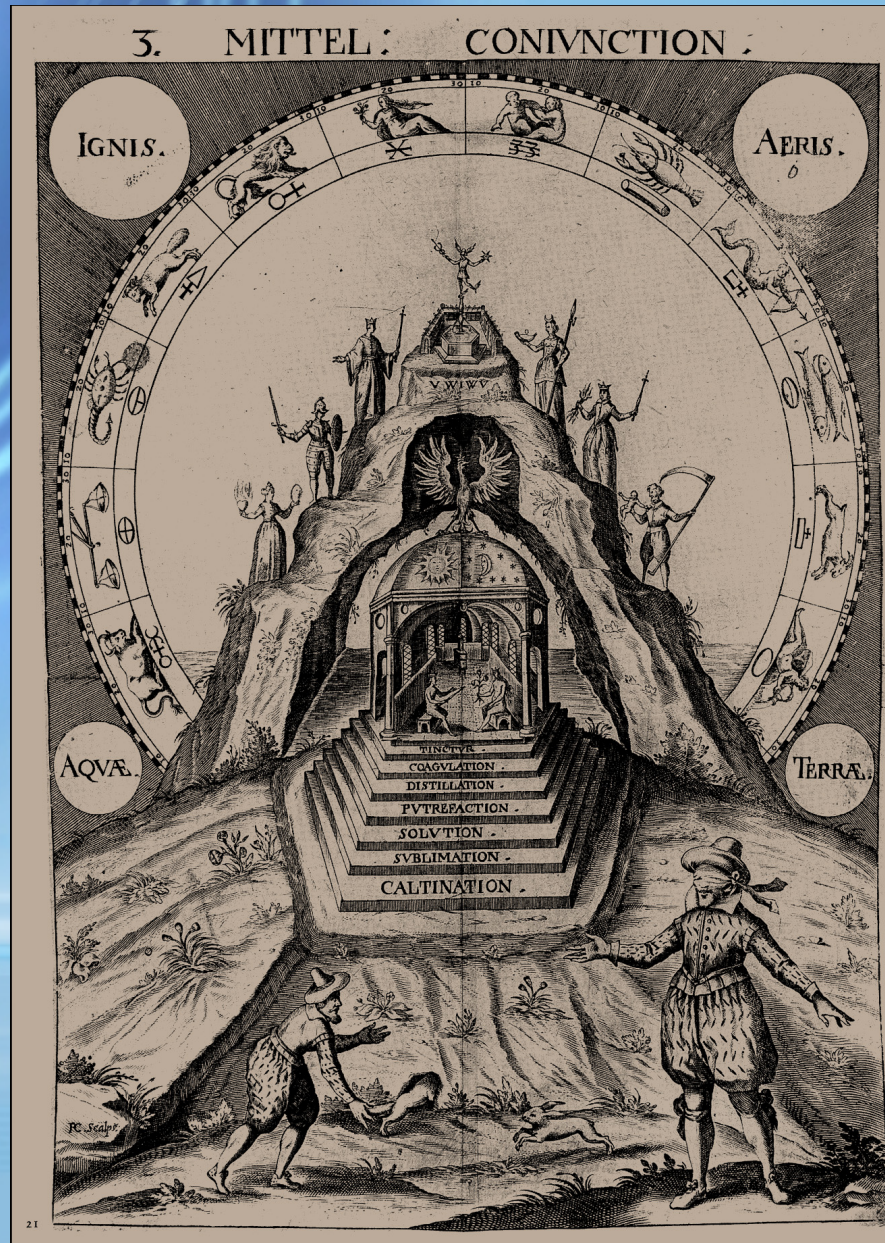
The alchemical opus as the Tree of Philosophy

- Johann Daniel Mylius, *Anatomia auri* (1628)



The alchemical opus as a spiritual ascent

- Steffan Michelspacher, *Cabala, Spiegel der Kunst und Natur* (1616)



The alchemical opus as a solar process

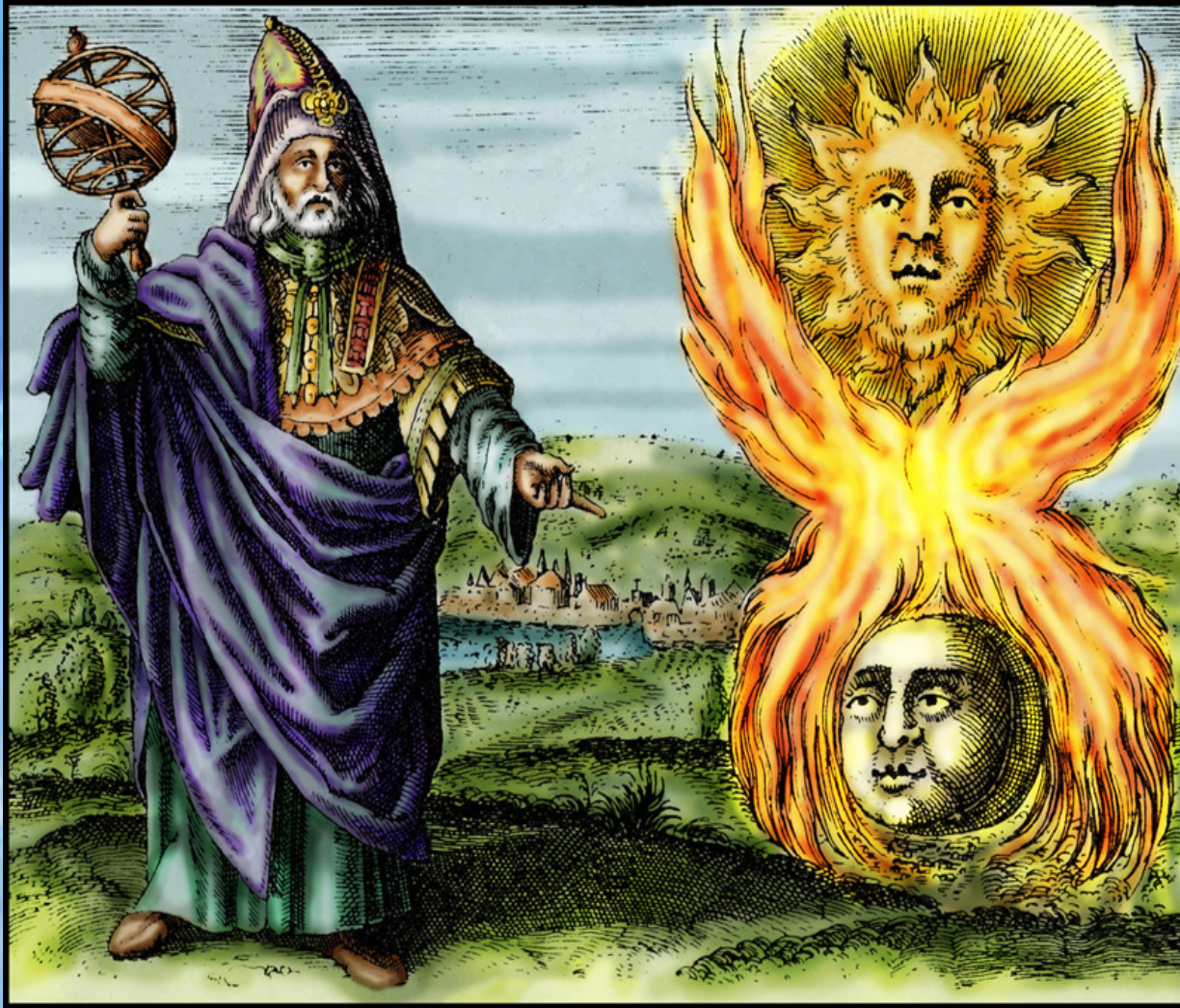
The lion as *prima materia* or primal nature contains, vomits forth,
and brings to birth the alchemical gold, imaged as the Sun



The alchemical opus

- The basis of the alchemical opus is the *prima materia* or 'primal substance', envisaged as universal unformed chaos, as one of the four elements, or as the planet Saturn in the form of lead, the densest and most base of the seven metals.
- The various alchemical stages – usually seven – are applied to the *prima materia* in order to release the alchemical gold hidden within it.
- The stages are themselves associated sometimes with the four elements and sometimes with the seven planets.
- *Calcinatio* (burning) equates with the process of fire. *Solutio* (dissolution) equates with the process of water. *Coagulatio* (crystallisation) equates with the element of earth. *Sublimatio* (distillation) equates with the process of air. The understanding of the elements as processes rather than inert substances seems to derive from much older ideas about the divinity and dynamism of the elements, found in the presocratic philosopher Empedocles (5th century BCE) and in Orphic materials from the 5th and 4th centuries BCE.
- When seven stages are described, they reflect the planets: *nigredo* (blackening) belongs to Saturn, *putrefactio* (dismemberment and decay) to Mars, *coniunctio* (union) to Venus, *sublimatio* (distillation) to Jupiter, *albedo* (whitening) to the Moon, *rubedo* (reddening) to the Sun, and the elixir or alchemical gold to Mercury/Hermes, envisaged as not only a planetary metal but also as the secret spirit-artificer of the alchemical work and as the alchemist himself/herself.

The alchemist as Thrice-Greatest Hermes, a.k.a. Mercurius
- Michael Maier, *Symbola aureae mensae* (1617)



The *prima materia* as the 'Mercurial dragon' of Nature
'Here is the Dragon that devours his own tail.' – Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens* (1618)



The *prima materia* as fire, imaged as a salamander

‘As the salamander lives in the fire, so does the Stone.’ - Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens* (1618)



The *prima materia* as Saturn
(from Salomon Trismosin, *Splendor Solis*, 1582)



The prima materia as air

‘The wind has carried it in his belly.’ – Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens* (1618)



The planets: Mercury as the alchemist's mentor

- Johann Joachim Becher, *Oedipus chemicus* (1664)



Mercury as the Philosophers' Stone, the goal of the opus
- Altus, *Mutus liber* (1677)



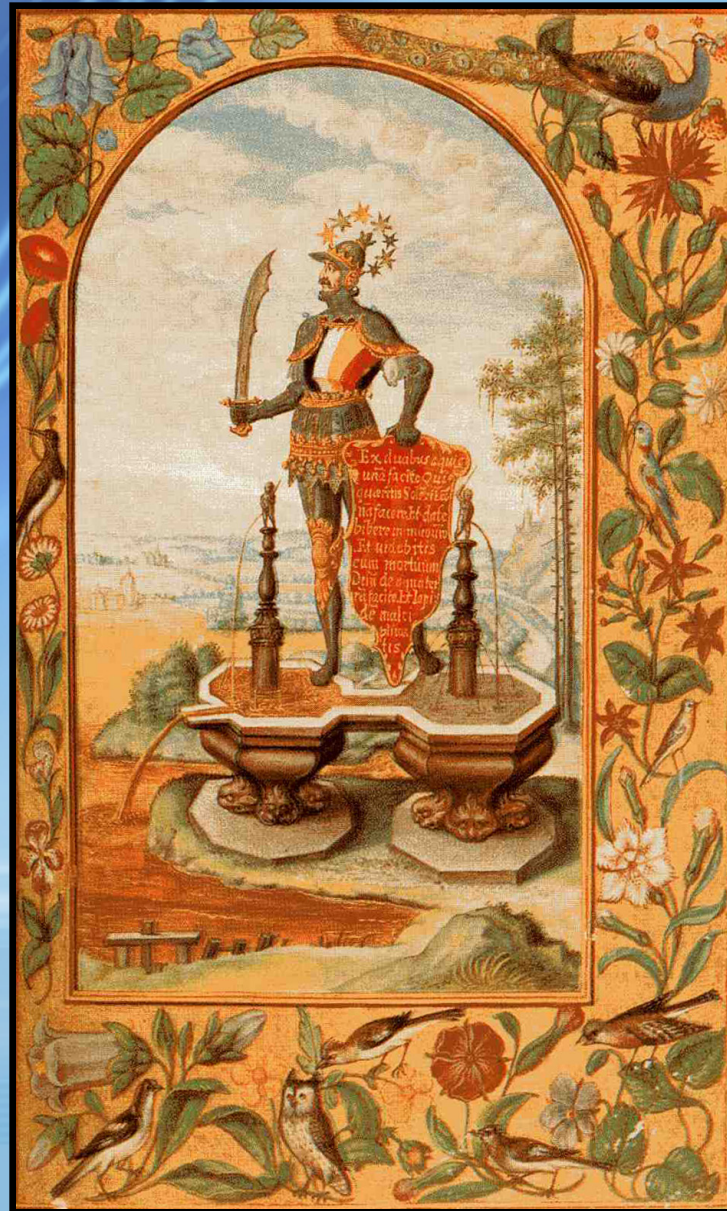
Mercury and Venus

'The Rebis [the Philosophers' Stone], like Hermaphroditus, is born from the twin mountains of Mercury and Venus [sulphur and mercury]'
– Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens* (1618)



The alchemical Mars

- Salomon Trismosin, *Splendor Solis* (1552)



The alchemical Jupiter

‘Two eagles [sulphur and mercury], one from the east, one from the west, come together’
– Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens* (1618)



Neptune and Pluto, accompanied by Jupiter as a swan, await the advent of
Sol, the alchemical gold
'Aqua: Which bears the white gold' - Barent Coenders van Helpen, Escalier des sages (1689)



The alchemical processes imaged as the four elements

coagulatio = earth

solutio = water

sublimatio = air

calcinatio = fire



Johann Daniel Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (1622)

Transformation through fire

‘The hermaphrodite, who lies in darkness like a corpse, needs fire.’

- Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens* (1618)

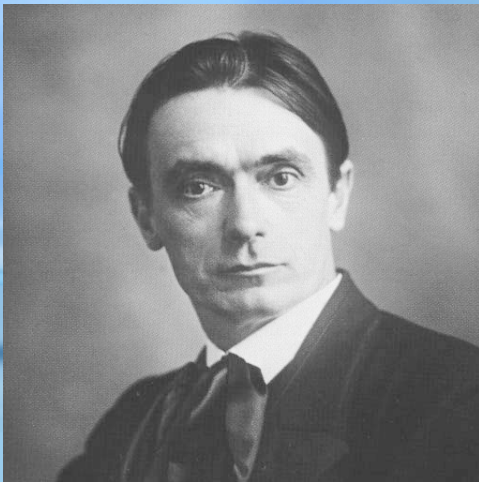
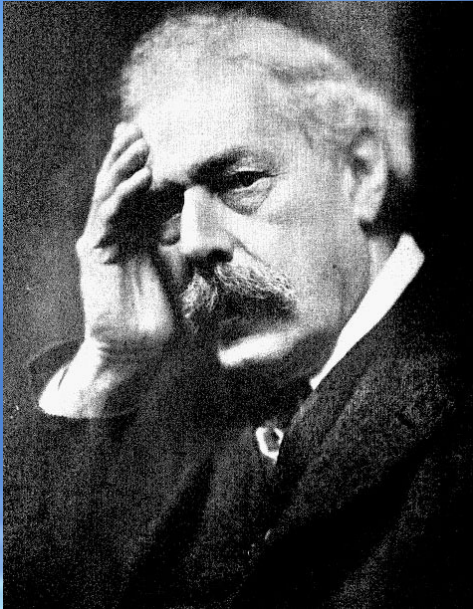


Transformation through dismemberment

‘The wolf devoured the King and, cremated, restored him to life.’ - Michael Maier, *Atalanta fugiens* (1618)



The spiritualisation of alchemy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries



- A. E. Waite (1857-1942) equated the stages of alchemy with seven stages of the soul's ascent to a mystical union with the godhead.
- The Philosopher's Stone is the 'greatest and most victorious of all lights' and is identified with Christ. [See A. E. Waite, *Azoth, or, The Star in the East* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1893)]
- Waite was strongly influenced by Paracelsus, whose work he edited and translated, and who believed that the goal of alchemy was the redemption of Nature through the 'shining body' in the human being – the imagination – which was the source of both disease and healing through its relationship with the 'World Soul'.
- Waite was also influenced by Rosicrucian ideas about alchemy, which concerned the spiritual redemption of the individual and the world through the symbolism of the spirit trapped in base matter.
- Another Theosophical thinker influenced by this current was Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925), founder of Anthroposophy, who likewise equated the seven stages of alchemy with a spiritual ascent to union with the World Soul.

The psychologisation of alchemy

- Academic literature on alchemy began to proliferate in the early 20th century, and scholars continue to debate whether Western alchemy, from the time of its origins in Hellenistic Egypt, was a spiritual or a practical discipline.
- Alchemy was first interpreted psychologically in 1917 by Herbert Silberer, who applied a psychoanalytic (Freudian) model in his *Hidden Symbolism of Alchemy and the Occult Arts*.
- During the 1950s Jung produced three volumes presenting an archetypal hypothesis on the nature of alchemy, viewing it as a process of inner development (individuation) projected onto the physical components of the alchemical opus and suggesting that alchemy had always contained this interiorised dimension.
- Some more recent scholars such as Dan Merkur insist that alchemy was originally a form of 'proto-science' and only became 'spiritualised' in the 17th century and 'psychologised' in the 20th.
- As this debate shows no signs of resolution, it might be wiser to consider that alchemy has never been monolithic any more than astrology has been, and that it is more sensible to think in terms of 'alchemies', some more practically oriented and some more concerned with the interior spiritual and psychological transformation of the alchemist, depending not only on cultural context but also on the predisposition of the individual alchemist.

The alchemical ascent as a transformative psychological process

C. G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*

‘The journey through the planetary houses boils down to becoming conscious of the good and the bad qualities in our character, and the apotheosis means no more than maximum consciousness, which amounts to maximal freedom of the will.’

- CW 14, ¶309

‘Astrologically...this process [alchemy] corresponds to an ascent through the planets from the dark, cold, distant Saturn to the sun. To the alchemists the connection between individual temperament and the positions of the planets was self-evident, for these elementary astrological considerations were the common property of any educated person in the Middle Ages as well as in antiquity. The ascent through the planetary spheres therefore meant something like a shedding of the characterological qualities indicated by the horoscope, a retrogressive liberation from the character imprinted by the [Gnostic] archons...The journey through the planetary houses, like the crossing of the great halls in the Egyptian underworld, therefore signifies the overcoming of a psychic obstacle, or of an autonomous complex, suitably represented by a planetary god or demon. Anyone who has passed through all the spheres is free from compulsion; he has won the crown of victory and become like a god.’

- CW 14, ¶308

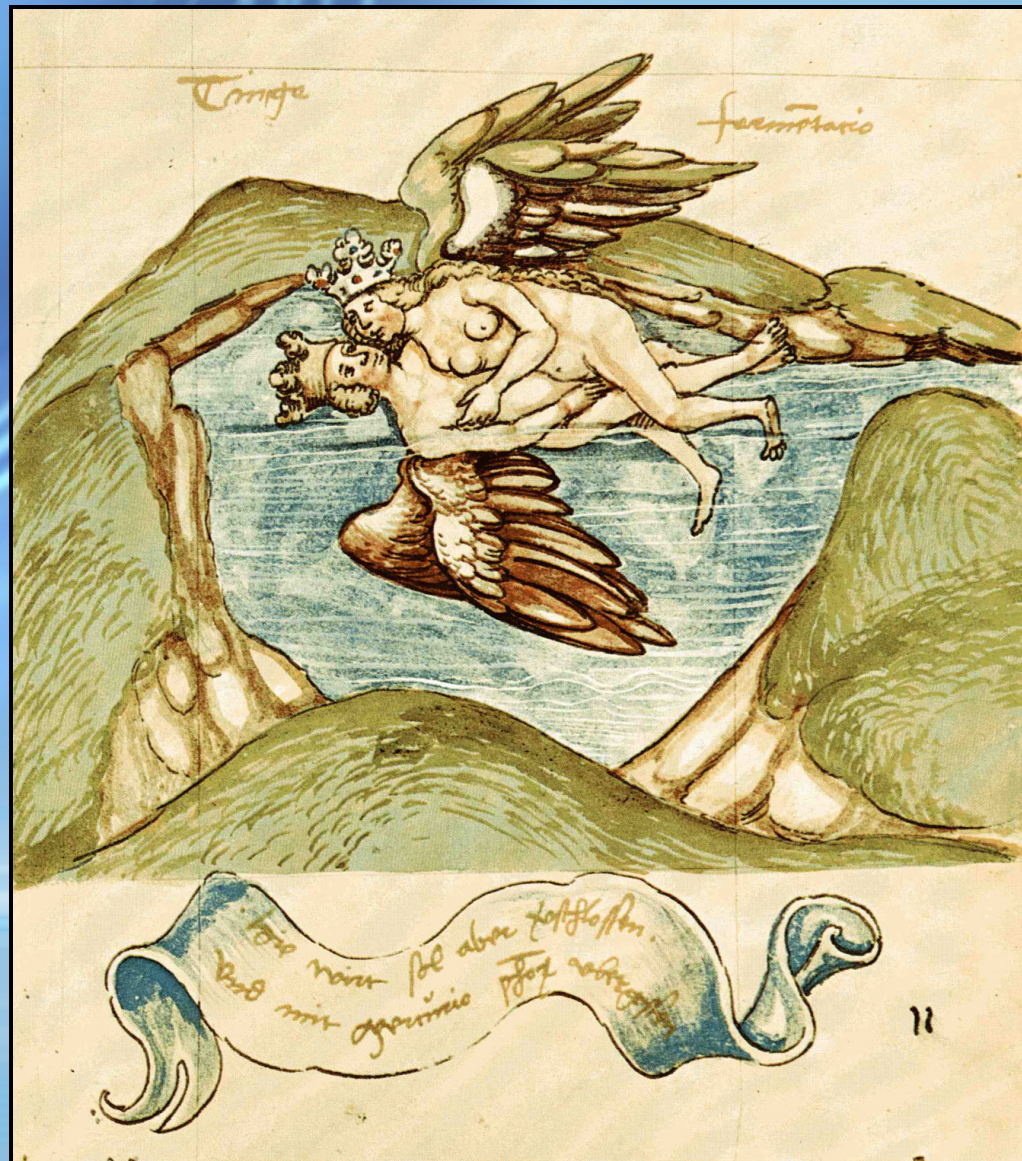
‘What the alchemists meant by ascent and descent...was the freeing of the soul from the shackles of darkness, or unconsciousness; its ascent to heaven, the widening of consciousness; and finally its return to earth, to hard reality, in the form of the tincture or healing drink, endowed with the powers of the Above.’

- CW 14, ¶297

The spiritualised *coniunctio* of the Sun and Moon

- Arnold of Villanova, *Rosarium philosophorum*, mid-16th century

This text and its images were used by Jung in his 'Psychology of the Transference'



The importance of alchemy for the history of astrology

- Alchemy has always been associated with an astrological cosmology and the idea of sympathies between planets and metals
- Alchemy carried a more imaginal form of astrology during the medieval and early modern periods when astrology was more mechanistic and influenced by Aristotelian concepts
- A resurgence of alchemy combined with a more transformational form of astrology occurred from the 17th century onward in circles associated with Rosicrucian, theosophical, Masonic, and occult currents
- During the occult revivals of the late 18th and late 19th centuries, many astrologers, such as Frederick Hockley and Elias Ashmole, were also alchemists
- The fusing of ideas of alchemy as a form of spiritual/psychological transformation with astrology and magic through late-19th and early-20th-century figures such as Aleister Crowley and Dion Fortune have influenced many contemporary spiritualities and astrologies
- Jung's understanding of alchemy as a transformational process reflecting 'individuation' strongly influenced his understanding of astrology and his use of it in relation to his patients
- Alchemy should not be viewed as a separate, autonomous historico-religious or 'proto-scientific' current independent of astrology, but is an integral part of astrology's development from late antiquity into the present day

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