

39 Alchemical Symbolism

Symbols have almost always been used in alchemy. It took two forms: typographic symbolism, literary symbolism, and pictorial symbolism.

In alchemy the typographical symbols were used to represent substances,

- [Sulfur](#) or [soul](#), the principle of [combustibility](#): ☿ (Sulphur symbol (fixed width).svg)
- [Mercury](#) or [spirit](#), the principle of [fusibility](#) and [volatility](#): ♀ (Mercury symbol (fixed width).svg)
- [Salt](#) or [body](#), the principle of non-combustibility and non-volatility: ♀ (Salt symbol (alchemical).svg)

the four elements,

- [Air](#) ☐
- [Earth](#) ☐
- [Fire](#) ☐
- [Water](#) ☐

base metals,

- [Lead](#), corresponding with [Saturn](#) ♄ (Saturn symbol (fixed width).svg)
- [Tin](#), corresponding with [Jupiter](#) ♃ (Jupiter symbol (fixed width).svg)
- [Iron](#), corresponding with [Mars](#) ♂ (Mars symbol (fixed width).svg)
- [Gold](#), corresponding with [Sun](#) ☉ ☼ (Sun symbol (fixed width).svg
Old symbol for sun.svgSol symbol (fixed width).svg)
- [Copper](#), corresponding with [Venus](#) ♀ (Venus symbol (fixed width).svg)
- [Mercury](#) (quicksilver), corresponding with [Mercury](#) ☿ (Mercury symbol (fixed width).svg)
- [Silver](#), corresponding with [Moon](#) ☾ or ☾ (Moon crescent symbol (fixed width).svg or
Moon decrescent symbol (fixed width).svg)

other elements,

- [Antimony](#) ♂ (Globus cruciger (fixed width).svg)
- [Arsenic](#) ☐ (Arsenic symbol.svg)
- [Bismuth](#) ☐ (Bismuth symbol.svg)

- [Cobalt](#) [Alkali symbol.svg](#)
- [Magnesium](#) ☿
- [Nickel](#) [Nickel symbol.svg](#) (previously used for [regulus](#) of sulfur)
- [Phosphorus](#) [Phosphorus symbol.svg](#) or [Phosphorus symbol \(inverted\).svg](#)
- [Platinum](#) " ♂" ([Platinum symbol.svg](#) or [Platinum symbol \(simple\).svg](#))
- [Sulphur](#) ☿ ([Sulphur symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#))
- [Zinc](#) [Zinc symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#)

compounds,

- [Acid](#) ☿ ([Vinegar symbol.svg](#))
- [Sal ammoniac](#) (ammonium chloride) ☿ ([Sal ammoniac symbol.svg](#))^[6]
- [Aqua fortis](#) (nitric acid) ☿ ([Aqua fortis.svg](#)), A.F.^[7]
- [Aqua regia](#) (nitro-hydrochloric acid) ☿ ([Aqua regia \(alchemical\).svg](#)), ☿ ([U+1F707.svg](#)), A.R.^[8]
- [Spirit of wine](#) (concentrated ethanol; also called *aqua vitae*) ☿ ([U+1F708.svg](#)), S.V. or ☿ ([Aqua vitae symbol.svg](#))
- [Amalgam](#) (alloys of a metal and mercury) ☿ ([U+1F75B.svg](#))
- [Cinnabar](#) (mercury sulfide) ☿ ([Cinnabar symbol.svg](#)), [Cinnabar Symbol.svg](#)^[citation needed]
- [Vinegar](#) (distilled) ☿ ([Distilled vinegar symbol.svg](#))
- [Vitriol](#) (sulfates) ☿ ([Vitriol symbol.svg](#))^[9]
- Black sulphur (residue from sublimation of sulfur) ☿ ([Black sulfur symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#))

processes,

1. [Calcination](#) ([Aries](#) [Aries symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#)) ♈
2. [Congelation](#) ([Taurus](#) [Taurus symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#)) ♉
3. [Fixation](#) ([Gemini](#) [Gemini symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#)) ♊
4. [Solution](#) ([Cancer](#) [Cancer symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#)) ♋
5. [Digestion](#) ([Leo](#) [Leo symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#)) ♌
6. [Distillation](#) ([Virgo](#) [Virgo symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#)) ♍
7. [Sublimation](#) ([Libra](#) [Libra symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#)) ♎
8. [Separation](#) ([Scorpio](#) [Scorpius symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#)) ♏
9. [Ceriation](#) ([Sagittarius](#) [Sagittarius symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#)) ♐
10. [Fermentation](#) ([Capricorn](#) [Capricornus symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#)) ♑ ([Putrefaction](#))
11. [Multiplication](#) ([Aquarius](#) [Aquarius symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#)) ♒

12. [Projection](#) ([Pisces](#) [Pisces symbol \(fixed width\).svg](#)) ✕

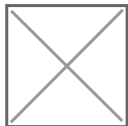
and units

- [Month](#) ☐☐ ([Month symbol.svg](#)) or xXx
- [Day](#) ☐☐ ([Day-night symbol.svg](#))
- [Hour](#) ☐☐ ([Hour symbol.svg](#))
- [Dram](#) 3; half-dram 3ß (☐☐)
- [Ounce](#) 3; half-ounce 3ß (☐☐)
- [Scruple](#) 3
- [Pound](#) 16

Were they used to hide information? Almost never. They were used to make writing faster, and if using the symbols was more work than spelling them out (in print, for example) then they were spelled out, usually *Capitalized and Italicized*.

We still use symbols in chemistry, mostly for elements, as in Na for sodium (from the Latin *natrium*) or Pb (from *plumbium*). We symbolize the yields arrow, physical states (*g* for gas, *aq* for aqueous).

Alchemical symbolism changed over time, sometimes the alchemist published his own list of how he uses the symbols. This is the one used by Basil Valentine:



We also have a long history of a more literary symbolism, exemplified by the fantastical descriptions of [Zosimos](#). Lyrical, imaginative, fantastic, these writings are not meant to hide, but to protect: a common theme in European alchemy is that this is a divine work, and those who treat it basely, namely those who want to greedily use the gold they make for power and wealth, will not prosper in the effort; so let's not make it easy for them. The Latin Geber says:

“ Our Art is reserved in the Divine Will of God, and is given to, or withheld from, whom he will; who is glorious, sublime, and full of all Justice and Goodness. And perhaps, for the punishment of your sophistical work [work directed solely to material transformation], he denies you the Art, and lamentably thrusts you into the by-path of error, and from your error into perpetual infelicity and misery: because he is most miserable and unhappy, to whom (after the end of his work and labour) God denies the sight of Truth. For such a man is constituted in perpetual labour, beset with all misfortune and infelicity, loseth the consolation, joy, and delight of his whole time, and consumeth his life in grief without profit.

Archeleos, a Byzantine-Greek alchemist around 730 A.D., gives us a poem reminding the acolytes of alchemy to seek divine guidance and to purify and perfect themselves in order to complete the Work:

“ With inspiration from above take heart
And strive with certain aim to reach the mark.
The work which thou expectest to perform
Will bring thee easily great joy and gain
When soul and body thou dost beautify
With chasteness, fasts and purity of mind,
Avoiding life's distractions and, alone
In prayerful service, giving praise to God,
Entreating him with supplicating hands
To grant thee grace and knowledge from above
That thou, O mystic, may'st more quickly know
How from one species to complete this work....
Thy body mortify by serving God :
Thy soul let wing to look on godliness :
So shalt thou never have at all the wish
To do or think a thing that is not right.
For strength of soul is manliness of mind,
Sagacious reasoning and prudent thought.
All passions purify and wash away
The stain of carnal joys with streams of tears
Which flood thy weeping eyes, revealing thus
The pain and anguish of a contrite heart.
Mind well Gehenna's fire and Judgement Day.
So live that thou deservedly may'st see
The shadowless and everlasting light.
And from thy lips let tuneful praise ascend
With choirs of angels unto God most high,
Who rules above with wisdom, king of all,
The Father with the Word and Holy Ghost,
For all eternity and endless time
Forever and forever more. Amen.

This might be the first time the idea of "As above, so below" of Hermes applies directly to the alchemist himself. This idea isn't expressed very often, but it continues throughout alchemy. It's a difficult idea for me to sort through because it was very confused in the mid-1800's when the Victorian Spiritualists grabbed this idea to explaining why so few could perform spiritualistic rituals (seances, spirit photography, ouija boards) successfully. They were a big influence on the late 1800's students of alchemy, A. E. Waite particularly, who then pulled this interpretation headlong into alchemy and started the idea that alchemy was highly secretive. But historical alchemy was not secretive! The alchemist wrote profusely, and explained, though poorly, what they were doing.

They were great fans of Aristotle, who explained the why's of everything he said, and emulated Aristotle in their writings.

Some confusion comes from the fact that no one says what the starting material is: but in Aristotle all substances were determined from their properties, and in any process if you impart 99.9% of the properties during the process itself, what does it matter what you start with? So I don't think the alchemists were too bothered about the starting material. Start with anything; we'll get rid of the original properties and impart new ones in the process, and turn it into the Elixir in the end. I think early interpreters of alchemy didn't follow this aspect of the philosophy of the alchemists. When they read the process described by the alchemists, and see no starting material listed, they mistook that absence as being a secret, and the typographical and literary symbolism as obfuscation.

In my reading I see something entirely different: I see typographical symbolism as a shorthand, and literary symbolism as having fun with the ideas. I see no secrets when reading alchemists; I see cleverness, and joy, and excitement in the effort. I see curiosity about nature, and about language.

Supporting this idea is an observation by one of the early scholars of alchemical history, Sherwood Taylor, who noticed that in the alchemical literature there is no mention of black magic, invocation of demons, necromancy, and other old evil practices known to be contemporaneously practiced. Alchemists were good men, righteous men, literate and curious, clever and hard working. Most were tremendously wealthy and weren't in it for the money. Atheist alchemists are rare; most consider alchemy the work of God and that by doing alchemy they are themselves reaching a higher level of divinity, as a priest would by doing priestly duties.

This is Archeleos again, using literary symbolism to describe the overall process:

“ A dragon springs therefrom which, when exposed
In horse's excrement for twenty days,
Devours his tail till naught thereof remains.
This dragon, whom they Ouroboros ['Tail-biter'] call,
Is white in looks and spotted in his skin.
And has a form and shape most strange to see.
When he was born he sprang from out the warm
And humid substance of united things.
The close embrace of male and female kind
— A union which occurred within the sea —
Brought forth this dragon, as already said;
A monster scorching all the earth with fire,
With all his might and panoply displayed,
He swims and comes unto a place within
The currents of the Nile; his gleaming skin
And all the bands which girdle him around
Are bright as gold and shine with points of light.

This dragon seize and slay with skilful art
Within the sea, and wield with speed thy knife
With double edges hot and moist, and then
His carcass having cleft in twain, lift out
The gall and bear away its blackened form,
All heavy with the weight of earthy bile;
Great clouds of steaming mist ascend therefrom
And these become on rising dense enough
To bear away the dragon from the sea
And lift him upward to a station warm,
The moisture of the air his lightened shape
And form sustaining; be most careful then
All burning of his substance to avoid
And change its nature to a stream divine
With quenching draughts; then pour the mercury
Into a gaping urn, and when its stream
Of sacred fluid stops to flow, then wash
Away with care the blackened dross of earth.
Thus having brightened what the darkness hid
Within the dragon's entrails thou wilt bring
A mystery unspeakable to light;
For it will shine exceeding bright and clear,
And, being tinged a perfect white throughout,
Will be revealed with wondrous brilliancy,
Its blackness having all been changed to white;
For when the cloud-sent water flows thereon
It cleanses every dark and earthy stain.
Thus he doth easily release himself
By drinking nectar, though completely dead;
He poureth out to mortals all his wealth
And by his help the Earth-born are sustained
Abundantly in life, when they have found
The wondrous mystery, which, being fixed
Will turn to silver, dazzling bright in kind,
A metal having naught of earthy taint,
So brilliant, clear, and wonderfully white.

I love the way that ends, "So brilliant, clear and wonderfully white." That's how I see alchemy. There is no darkness there, save when I misread what they have written.

Frontline, the PSB documentary series, broadcast a four-hour show called "[From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians](#)" about how the Church grew from a small band of believers into multiple empires. In that documentary there is a short discussion by one of the historians about scripture:

Prof. JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN: The major issue for me is whether the people who told us the stories in the ancient world took them all literally, and now we're so smart that we know to take them symbolically, or they all intended them symbolically and we're so dumb that we've been taking them literally? And I really am with the second option. I think we have been misinterpreting these stories because the people who write them don't seem the least bit worried about their diversity. We see the problem and then we want to insist that they're literal. I think we have misread the Scriptures, not that they have miswritten them.

[Transcript](#), *Frontline: From Jesus to Christ*, Part 2

The same applies to alchemy. Alchemists did not miswrite their works; any fault in interpretation is ours. That documentary, by the way, is very much worth your time to watch.

I'll talk about the pictorial symbolism in a future post on Emblem Books, the picture books in the early days of printing.

Symbolism can be taken the wrong way. Due to the inexact way symbols represent an idea, they can easily be taken the wrong way. I take them all as enjoyment, not as being literal. Carl Jung, a very famous psychologist, spent a huge amount of effort to demonstrate that symbolism was literal, so literal that all humanity shared a common set of symbols. These symbols were present in dreams. In volume 12 of a 20-volume set devoted to this idea, *Psychology and Alchemy*, Jung spends most of his time describing the alchemical symbolism of one of his clients, a vivid dreamer named Wolfgang Pauli. Pauli was famous on his own right, as one of the founders of quantum theory (the *Pauli exclusion principle* is named after him). I think most psychologists look back at Jung's work as being mostly silly; we do not all dream using the same symbolism. We dream about ourselves. Everything in our dreams is us, and is probably more literal than we think. In dreams, a pen is just a pen.

Revision #2

Created 3 October 2023 12:03:12 by bruce

Updated 30 October 2024 13:05:06 by bruce