

Excerpt from:

A DICTIONARY of Western ALCHEMY

By Jordan Stratford

Excerpt from the Introduction:

"Some have declared that it lies within our choice to gaze continually upon a world of equal or even greater wonder and beauty. It is said by these that the experiments of the alchemists are, in fact, related not to the transmutation of metals, but to the transmutation of the entire universe. This method, or art, or science, or whatever we choose to call it, is simply concerned to restore the delights of the primal paradise; to enable men, if they will, to inhabit a world of joy and splendor. It is perhaps possible that there is such an experiment, and that there are some who have made it."

- Richard Rolle de Hampole, 1380

I recognize the stone as soon as I see it, across the vaulted catacomb.

Eighteen months before the eclipse, I'm in the Musée Cluny in Paris. The Cluny is the dream-attic of every medievalist; the resting place of every odd "bit" from every cathedral and chateau in the city that no longer has room for it. And among these curiosities is this immediately compelling artifact: the tombstone of 14th century alchemist Nicholas Flamel.

Flamel and his wife Perenelle came from modest beginnings to count themselves among the most generous philanthropists of medieval Paris. They attributed this vast wealth, from which they founded and supported numerous churches and hospitals, to an amount of gold produced via the Philosopher's Stone – the veritable Holy Grail of the Alchemists.

At first, the tombstone's artful symbolism and antiquity of style shout alchemy at the observer. Given the centuries of mythic accretion, this is hardly surprising. Surely we can

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expect to see the cryptograms of alchemical cipher here – grotesque dragons, hermaphrodites, swans and toads, the sun and moon erupting from exotic plants, a sage concocting homonculi in a jar...

But Christ, flanked by Peter and Paul, the common-garden depiction of sun and moon, and the shrouded figure awaiting judgment and resurrection – these are all typical of a pious, accomplished Christian of the 14th century. In this engraving of his own device, Flamel chose to be remembered in humility; in his faith, and not his occult triumph.

Alchemy is not what I wanted it to be. And yet, is still very much something.

Alchemy (al kemi) means "of Khem", the "black" land: Ægypt. (Stick a shovel in the dirt and turn it over. If the earth is black, it's fertile and close to the river; you can plant something here and it will grow and you will not starve to death. If the earth is red, you're in the desert, and if you plant something here you're going to die. The black land, Khem, is what will sustain and nourish you). Alchemy is both the natural science of that particular culture and working the fertile soil of myth and symbol. It starts from a world view that connects the ripening of plants with the nature of the Names of God – a reaching out to organize a natural history rooted in the Divine.

Egyptian science – astronomy, metalurgy, mathematics, biology, botany, anatomy – existed a means of proving a connection, a communion, between the finite and infinite. It's what Catholic writer Andrew Greeley calls "the catholic imagination" – a divinity present, immanent, indwelling, and informing.

Alchemy is a natural philosophy with a practical application. The world of the alchemist makes sense, is cyclical rather than linear, and is largely concerned with *understanding* as a means of healing. The true alchemists were physicians trying to wrap their head around "the rules" in order to heal a fractured cosmos. It is ultimately a catholic (universal), immanent world view.