



# Adam McLean's Study Course on Inner alchemy and alchemical symbolism

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## Lesson Sixteen : Further exercise in reading an emblem

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Following our first attempt at reading emblems I would like us now to look at a quite elaborate engraving and try to apply the various analytical tools we have been exploring in the first half of this course.

This emblem is from the 'Hermetic Triumph' (*Le triomphe hermetique, ou La pierre philosophale victorieuse*. Amsterdam: Henry Wetstein, 1689) a number of editions of which were subsequently published in French, German and English. If you wish you can study the text in English of this book of alchemical dialogues on the alchemy web site [http://www.levity.com/alchemy/herm\\_tr.html](http://www.levity.com/alchemy/herm_tr.html) It is interesting that this emblem is provided with a short explanation in the text. We will, however, first look at it through our own tools and later compare this with what the original book had to say. Again I use my coloured version of the image as this may help us in identifying the individual symbols.

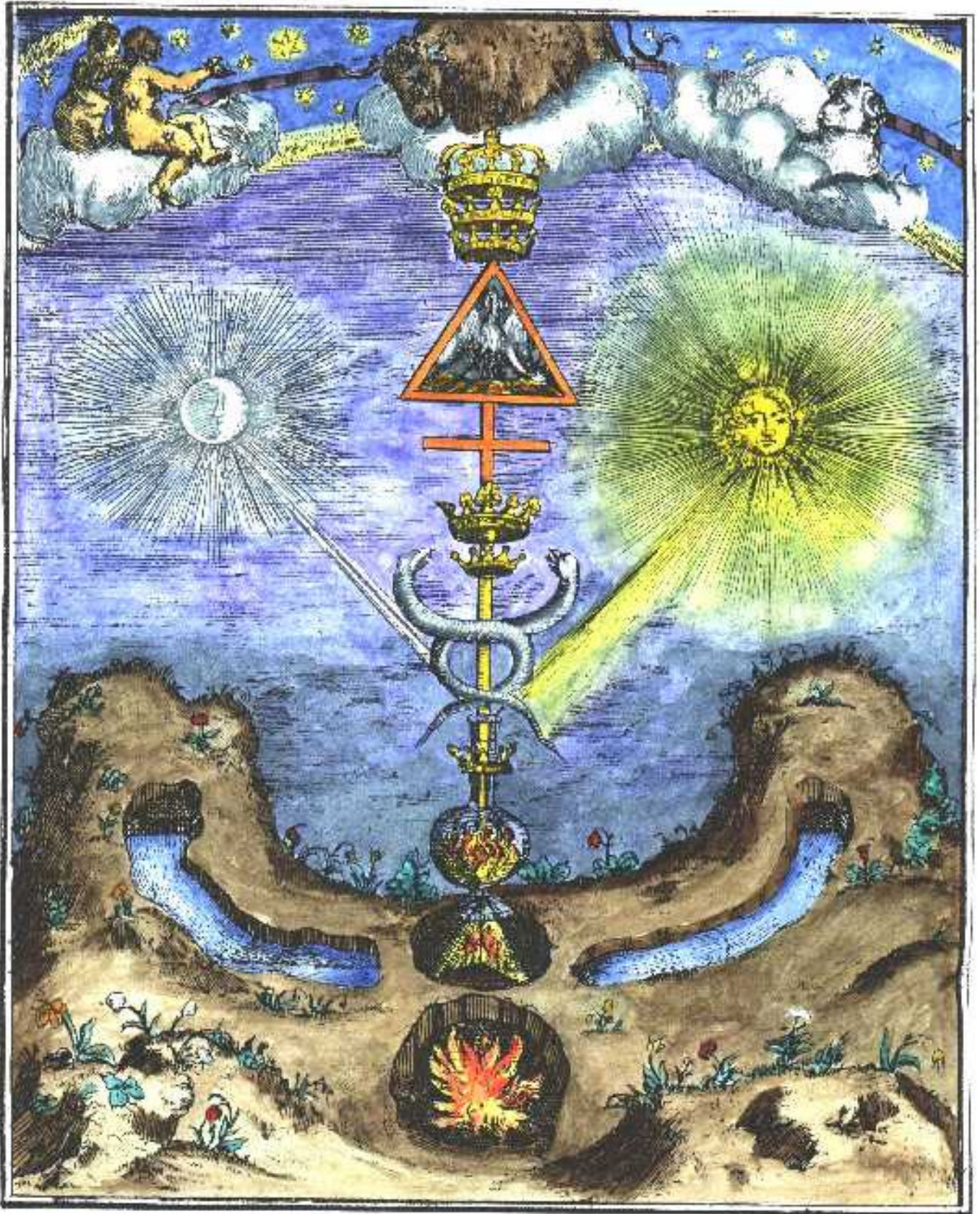
After examining and identifying all the symbols in the emblem the next thing we should note is the geometrical structure. There is a very strong vertical arrangement of symbols. We can identify these as :

Zodiacal sign of the bull  
Triple crown  
Sulphur symbol with phoenix  
Double crown  
Caduceus  
Single crown  
Flask containing fire  
Cave with triangular or tetrahedral fiery forms  
Fire under the earth

There is also a division into three domains - the starry world at the top, the earth with its subterranean spaces below and this vertical symbolic connection.

We also have a polarity of Moon and Sun (left and right respectively) which seems to form a downward pointing triangle with the lower part of the caduceus and the neck of the flask. In the earth below we also see two holes or caves out of which come springs of water. There is another implied triangle between these two springs and the cavern with triangular or tetrahedral fiery forms into which they flow.

The emblem, which was engraved a number of times throughout the various editions, usually has a short Latin text ascribed to Hermes, which can be roughly translated "The stone which is venerable is hidden in the caverns of the metals."



Let us look at the three regions of this emblem in more detail.

The uppermost is a conventional depiction of the starry heavens with the three constellations Aries, Taurus and Gemini - the spring signs. The bull, the zenith of the spring season, is central. In the absence of any indication as to why this particular triple of zodiacal signs is focussed on here, we may have to resort to the general idea that spring represents a new beginning, which resonates with the idea of alchemical change. In other emblems we may have a more definite reason as to why a particular constellation appears but here it is not immediately obvious from the context. Often in interpreting an alchemical emblem we will just have to leave some questions unanswered or try to find some general statement that gives us at least some idea of why these symbols have been chosen.

The lowermost region is that of the plane of the earth. At the left and right are two mountains or hills from the bases of which streams flow towards the central area. As these two stand immediately below the Moon and Sun and seem to reach up towards them, we can perhaps see them as being the earthly embodiment in substance of the lunar and solar energies. (To some alchemist's minds the veins of metals in the earth were like streams of a particular planetary force manifested in substance.) In the central space we see a cave or opening into the earth in which flames of fire are active. Above this is another opening where the two triangular forms are seen. On close examination it appears to be a tetrahedron of which we are seeing the front two triangular facets. These appear to have flames or vapours playing through them. The two streams flow towards this opening. So here in the "caverns of the metals" water and fire meet in some way. Immediately above this is an alchemical flask which seems to be supported on the triangles or tetrahedron. Thus this flask is uniting the qualities or substances of the streams. Within it are fumes or flames. This flask, in a sense, unites the energies of the two streams and through being heated by the fire in the earth, begins a process of purification. This proceeds up the central column. From below the base of this column the earthly fire of transformation works upward, while from above the heavenly fire works downward.

The rays from the Moon and Sun pour down from above onto this flask and bring their forces into the work. When it has reached a first stage of development it is given a crown. In an alchemical emblem the crowning of an object or symbol often means that this has reached a stage of perfection, or dominion or power over a particular realm. This central column presents a series of three such crownings. The second stage of the development of the alchemical work is pictured by the caduceus - the symbol of Mercury - the central rod of which emerges from the open neck of the flask. This caduceus with its intertwined snakes indicates that the interweaving of the two primary forces - the Moon and Sun, water and fire, earthly and heavenly fire - has now taken place. The third stage is marked by the appearance of the sulphur symbol **D** crowned by a triple crown. Inside this is a phoenix rising from flames, this indicates a spiritualising or final transformation, as the essence rises reborn from the purifying fire.

We must now try to get an overview of what this emblem is trying to say to us - the

message the composer was trying to convey through his arrangement of symbols. The alchemical drama presented in this emblem is that of the transformation and purification of material found in the earth realm in the "caverns of the metals". Through the alchemical process, depicted here as a kind of tower or column leading from the earth to the heavens, the "stone which is venerable" is made. This contains in essence the potentialities of the earthly realm. Thus this emblem pictures to us that the work of the alchemist is to be founded in the earthly realm, from which the alchemist must build a tower of alchemical processes, which weaves together the primal forces and integrates them through a series of three stages into a transforming essence. First he must heat his flask, then form the mercurial caduceus, and finally make the phoenix material that rises from the ashes in the Sulphur symbol. Physically this is the venerable philosophers' stone, but in an inner or spiritual way it is the ability of the alchemist to see that spiritual qualities are rooted and founded in the earth, and the earthly is transformed by its receiving the influences from above. In a sense this emblem (as do many others) pictures to us part of the message of the *Emerald Tablet* of Hermes "That which is above is as that which is below, and that which is below is as that which is above... to accomplish the miracle of the one thing."

I will leave it to you now as an exercise to see if our reading of this emblem based on the approach of this course links in any way with the explanation of the emblem given in the original book.

Here is the commentary from the original book.

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### The *General Explication* of the Embleme

It ought not to be expected to find here a particular Explication, such as should undraw the Curtains which are spread over the philosophick Enigma, for to show the Truth quite naked; for if that were [done], there would remain nothing more to be done but to burn all the Writings of the Philosophers: The Wise would not have any more Advantage over the Ignorant; the one and the other would be equally skilled in this wonderful Art.

It ought therefore to be thought sufficient to see in this Figure, as in Looking-Glass, the Abridgement of the whole secret Philosophy, which is contained in this little Book, in which all the Parts of this Emblem are explained as clear as it is permitted to be done.

Those that are initiated in the Philosophick Mysteries, will easily and presently comprehend the Sense which is hid under this Figure. But these who have not these Lights, must here consider in general a mutual Correspondence betwixt the Heavens and the Earth, by Means of the Sun and Moon, who are like the secret Ties of this Philosophical Union.

They will see in the Practice of the Work, who parabolical Rivulets, who confounding [or mixing] themselves secretly together, give Birth to the mysterious Triangular Stone, which is the Foundation of the Art.

They will see a secret and natural Fire, of which the Spirit penetrating the Stone, sublimates it in Vapours, who condense themselves in the Vessel.

They will see what Efficacy the sublimed Stone receives of the Sun and Moon, who are its Father and Mother, of whom it inherits presently its first Crown of Perfection.

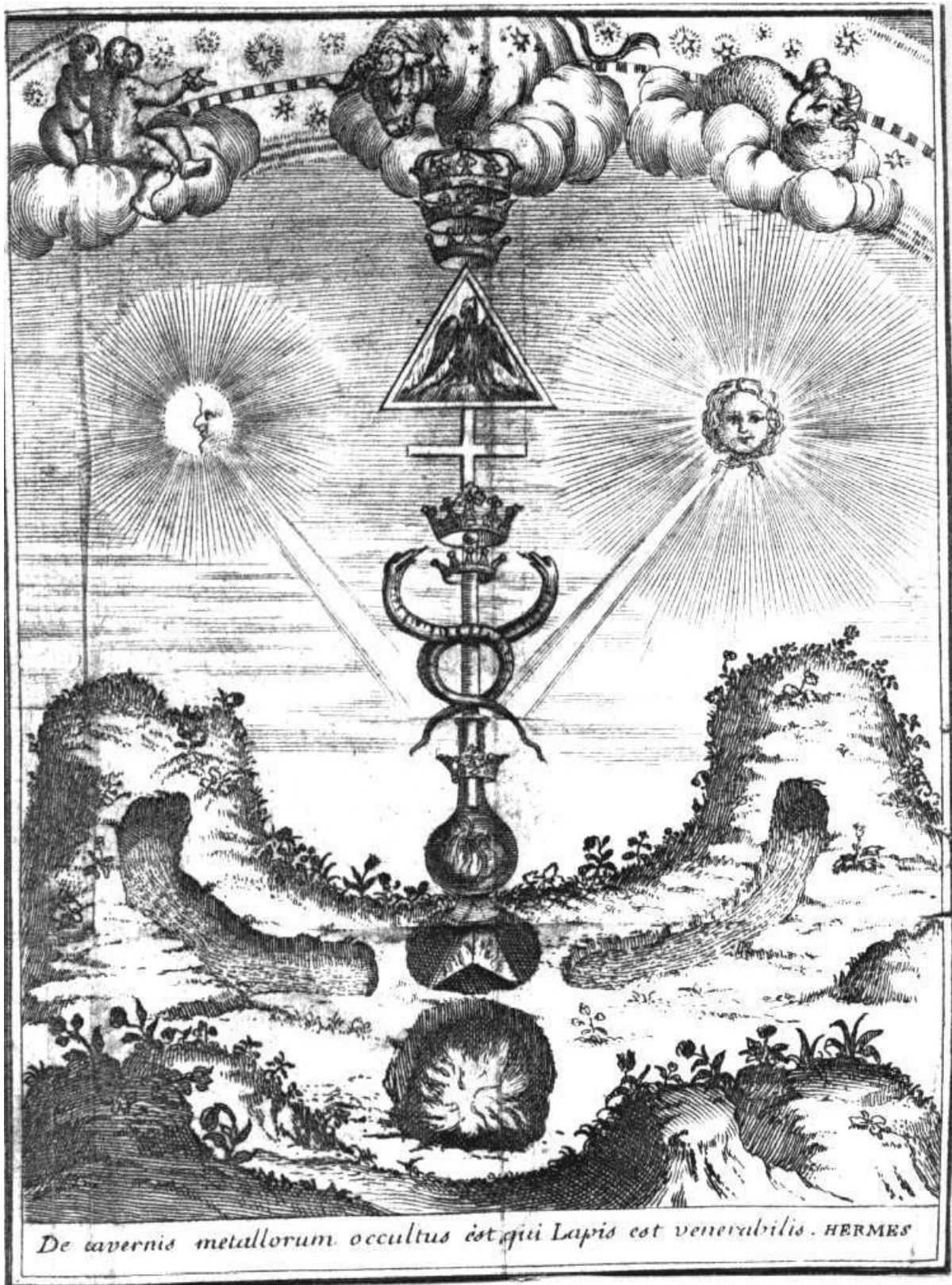
They will see in the Continuation of the Practice [or in the Progress of the Work,] that the Art gives to this Divine Liquor a double Crown of Perfection, by the Conversion of Elements, and by the Extraction and the Depuration of the Principles, by which it becomes to be that mysterious Rod of *Mercury*, which operates [or performs] such surprising Metamorphosings.

They will see that this same *Mercury*, as a *Phoenix*, who takes a new Birth in the Fire, arrives by the Magistry to the last Perfection of the fixed Sulphur of the Philosophers, which gives it a foreign Power over the three Genders [or Reigns] of Nature; of which the three-fold Crown (upon which is set for this Purpose the Hieroglyphic Figure of the World) is the most material [or essential] Character.

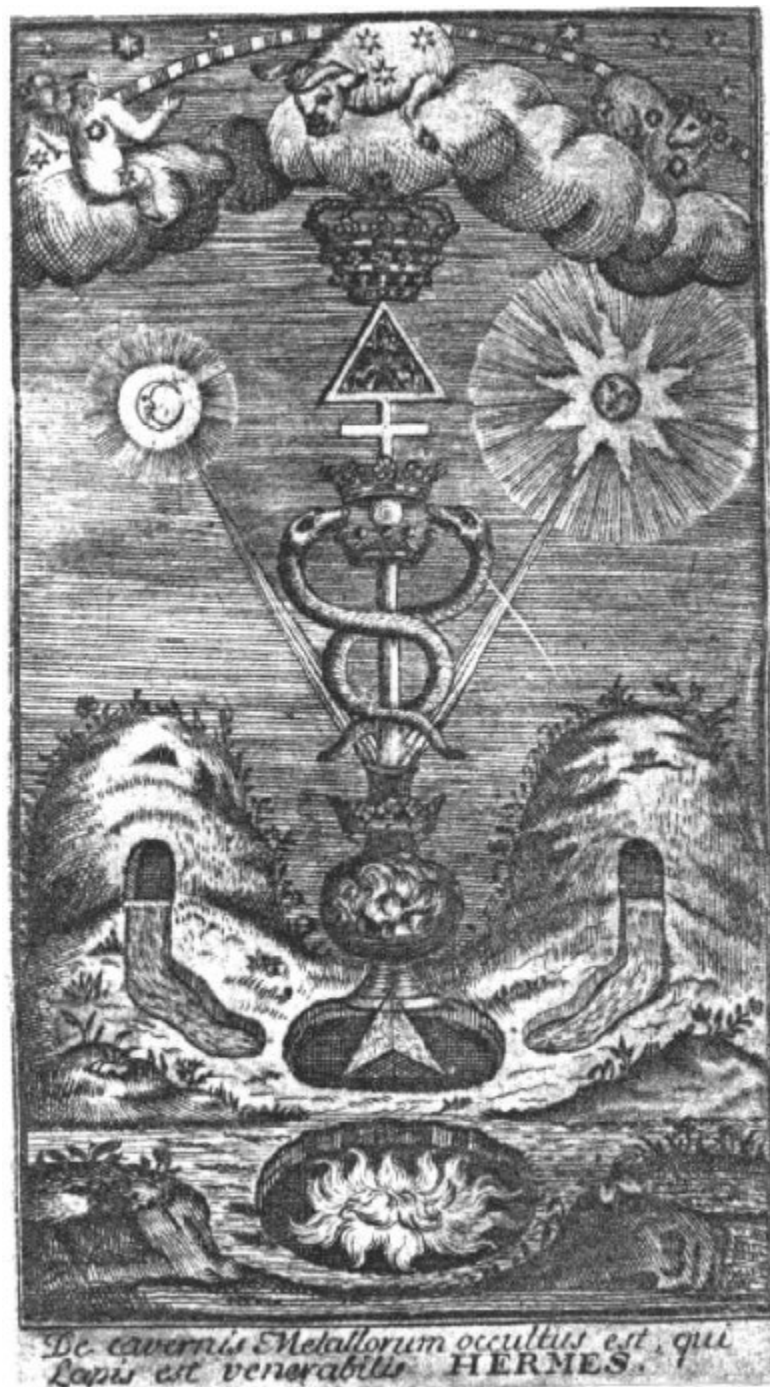
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I also add here three other engravings of this emblem. There are few minor variations in the symbolism that you may care to explore.

Version of the emblem from the 1699, Amsterdam edition in French.



Version of the emblem from the 1723 English edition, printed in London.



Version of the emblem from the 1765 German edition, printed in Frankfurt

