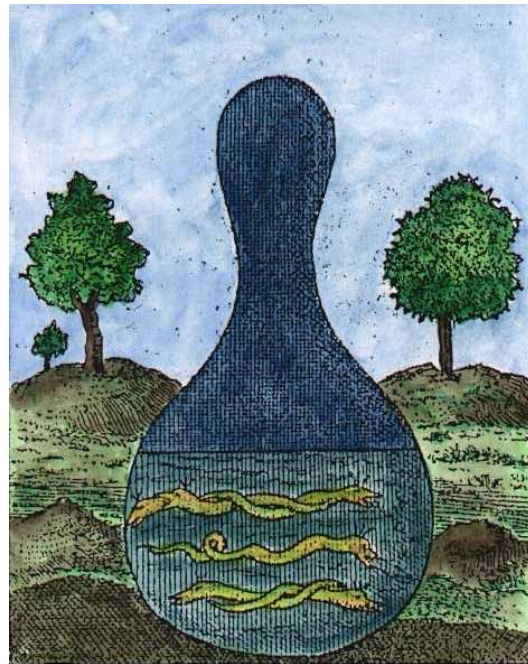
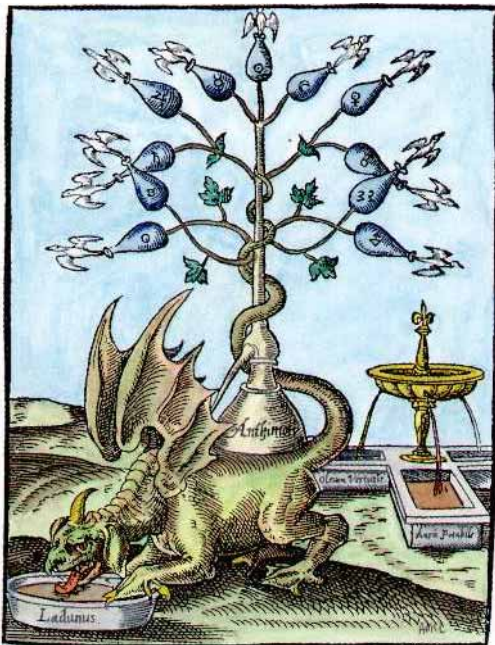




Adam McLean's Study Course on Inner alchemy and alchemical symbolism

Lesson Six : Resolution of opposites (snake)

In the previous lesson we looked at the resolution of opposites primarily through the symbols of the male and female. In this lesson we will focus upon another symbol which contains the opposites within itself - the snake. There are other facets to the snake as an alchemical symbol but here we will just focus on its aspect of duality, its head and tail.



The emblem on the left clearly demonstrates the polarities of the head and tail of the snake dragon. Its mouth is lapping up the liquid in the bowl, while its tail coils around the distillation apparatus. It is this head and tail aspect which we will be exploring in this lesson, and the ways in which these are resolved, conjoined or united together in alchemical emblems.

The first main way is by this being pictured as two snakes intertwining as in the emblem on the right. Here the polarised snake forms wrap around each other, head to tail. This is often also pictured through the image of the caduceus - the intertwined snakes of the Mercury symbol. The caduceus in this context is thus a picture of the meeting and integration of the opposing elements found in the snake.

The second way in which the snake comes to terms with the opposites bound up in itself is by swallowing its own tail, and forming the gesture of the 'ouroboros'. This is a common symbol in many illustrations and we will look at these in some detail.



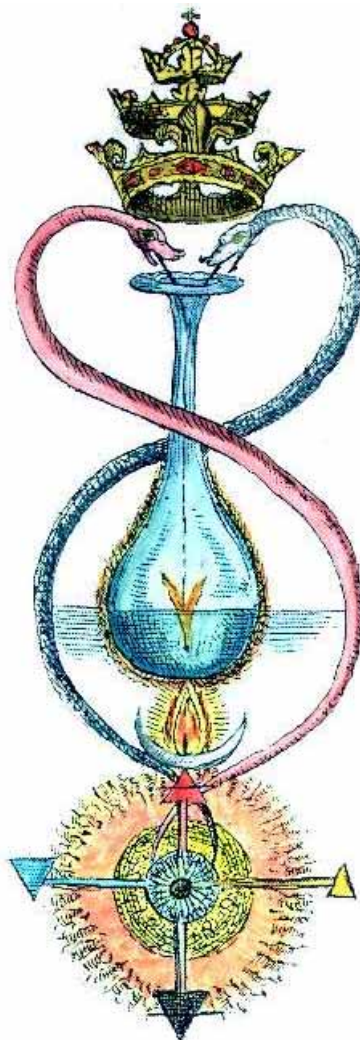
This image from a Greek manuscript further emphasises the opposite elements bound in the snake symbol by colouring it red and green.

In this lesson I want you first to consider the images of the intertwining snakes, and to explore the various ways in which this occurs. It is important that you begin to develop an inner vocabulary of such images. Rather than having a simple abstract, over-intellectualised idea of the intertwined snakes, you should, by viewing and contemplating the various ways in which this appears in alchemical emblems, begin have a sense of what this image means in its alchemical context. Please, I beg you, resist the temptation to import into your contemplation all sorts of parallels with other traditions. No kundalini images please. The kundalini ideas only entered European thought at the end of the 19th century. The alchemists worked with the images of the snake in their own context hundreds of years before this. They had a clear picture they wanted to present of this snake image. It is this that we want to try to get close to. This is a course on alchemical symbolism, and you should try to keep yourself focussed upon this. You should work with the source material of alchemical emblems, and not bring external ideas into your work. The importation of images from disparate traditions and the eclectic gathering together of unrelated material will just give rise to inner confusion. I emphasise this point strongly here because the snake image is found in many different traditions with differing resonances. Here we investigate the snake in its alchemical context.

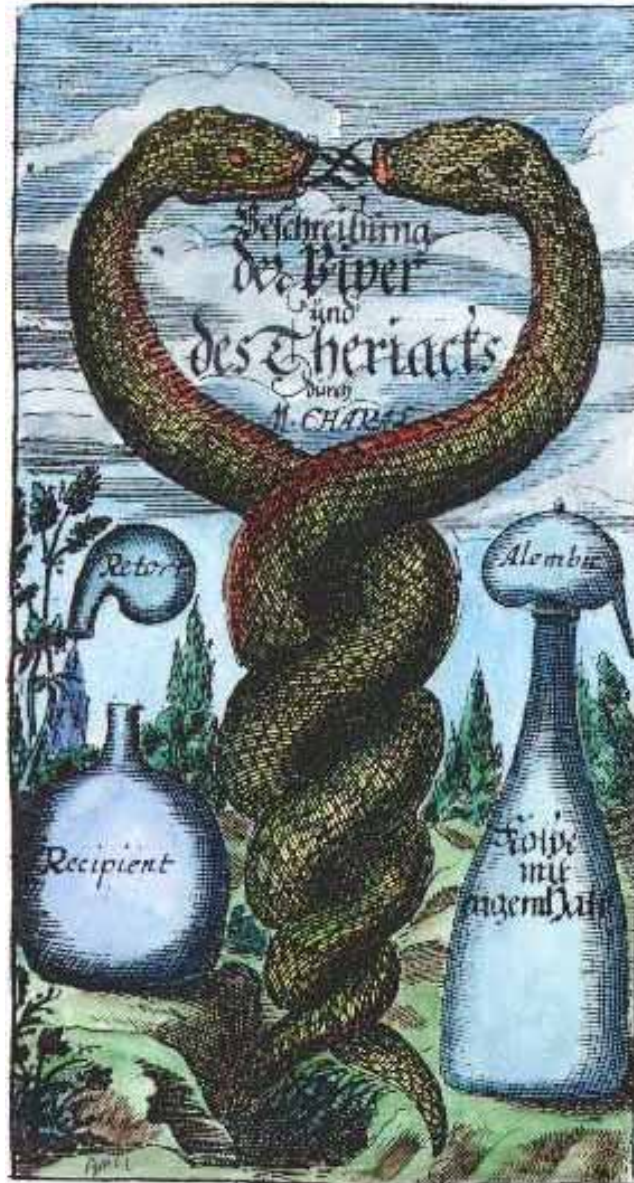
Exercises on the intertwined snakes.

Here I wish you to look at the examples and note the way in which the snakes are presented to us in the space of the emblem. The intertwining of the snakes is echoed or reflected in other symbols in the emblem. Please do not rush to intellectually interpret these at this stage, merely note what is happening and see if you can find any common elements, or symbolic themes in this group of examples. Please look at any books with images in your collection and seek other examples. It is not possible for me to provide you with all the examples necessary for you to inwardly grasp the essence of the intertwined snakes.

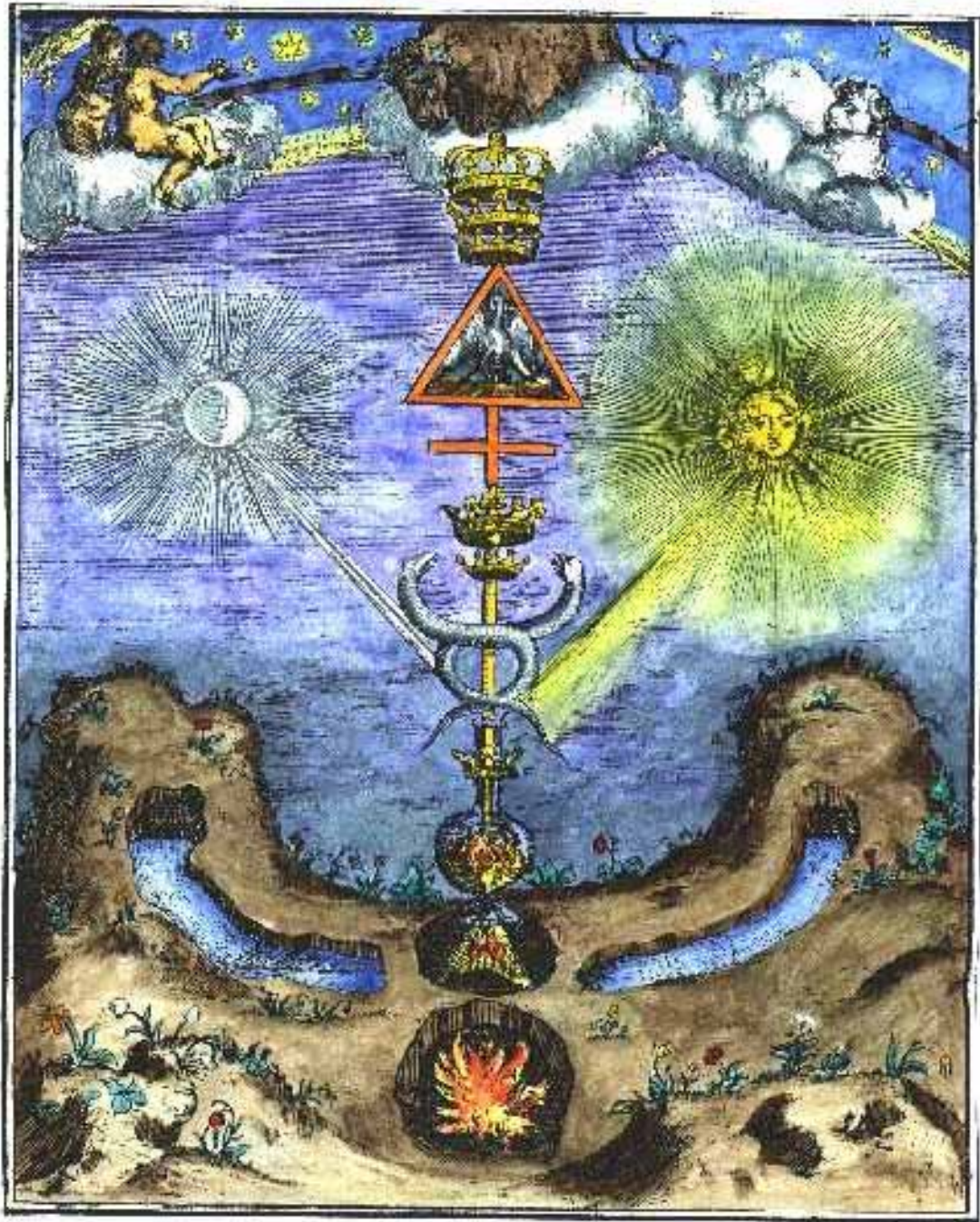
Example 1. . Figure from an 18th century manuscript entitled *Bibliothèque des sages*



Example 2. Engraved frontispiece from Moses Charas *Neu-erfahrne Proben von der Viper*



Example 3. Engraving from, *Le triomphe hermetique*, Amsterdam, 1689



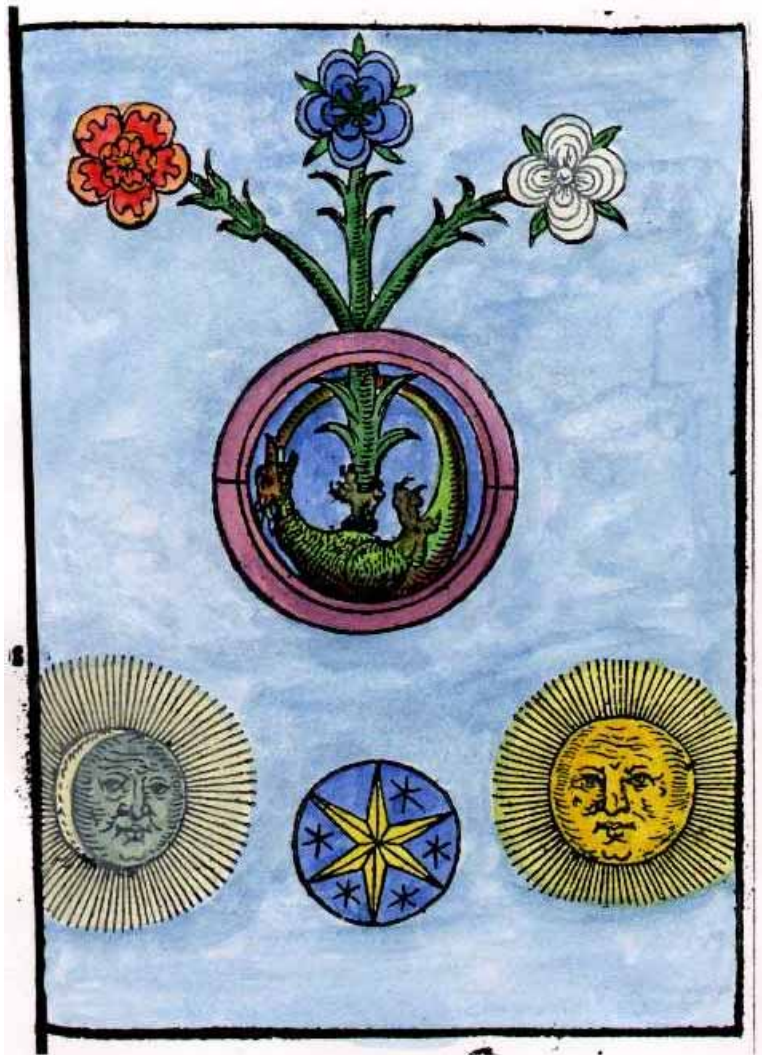
Example 4. An illustration from the Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit. Here one should note the relevance of the previous lesson.



Exercises on the Ouroboros.

Now we move on to the other main aspect of the snake in alchemical symbolism - that of its forming a circle by seizing its own tail, thereby uniting its head and tail. Sometimes this is seen as a feeding upon itself, a uniting itself with its own substance. Also it can be an image of a process turning in upon itself, drawing a boundary within which the process is sealed off from the outer influences. Ideas such as that of eternity, or the image of the soul can readily be projected upon this symbol. Please just resist your tendency to intellectualise about the symbol but just attend to the ways in which it appears in these examples and note and investigate the other symbols against which it appears.

Example 5. Woodcut 16 from the *Pandora*.



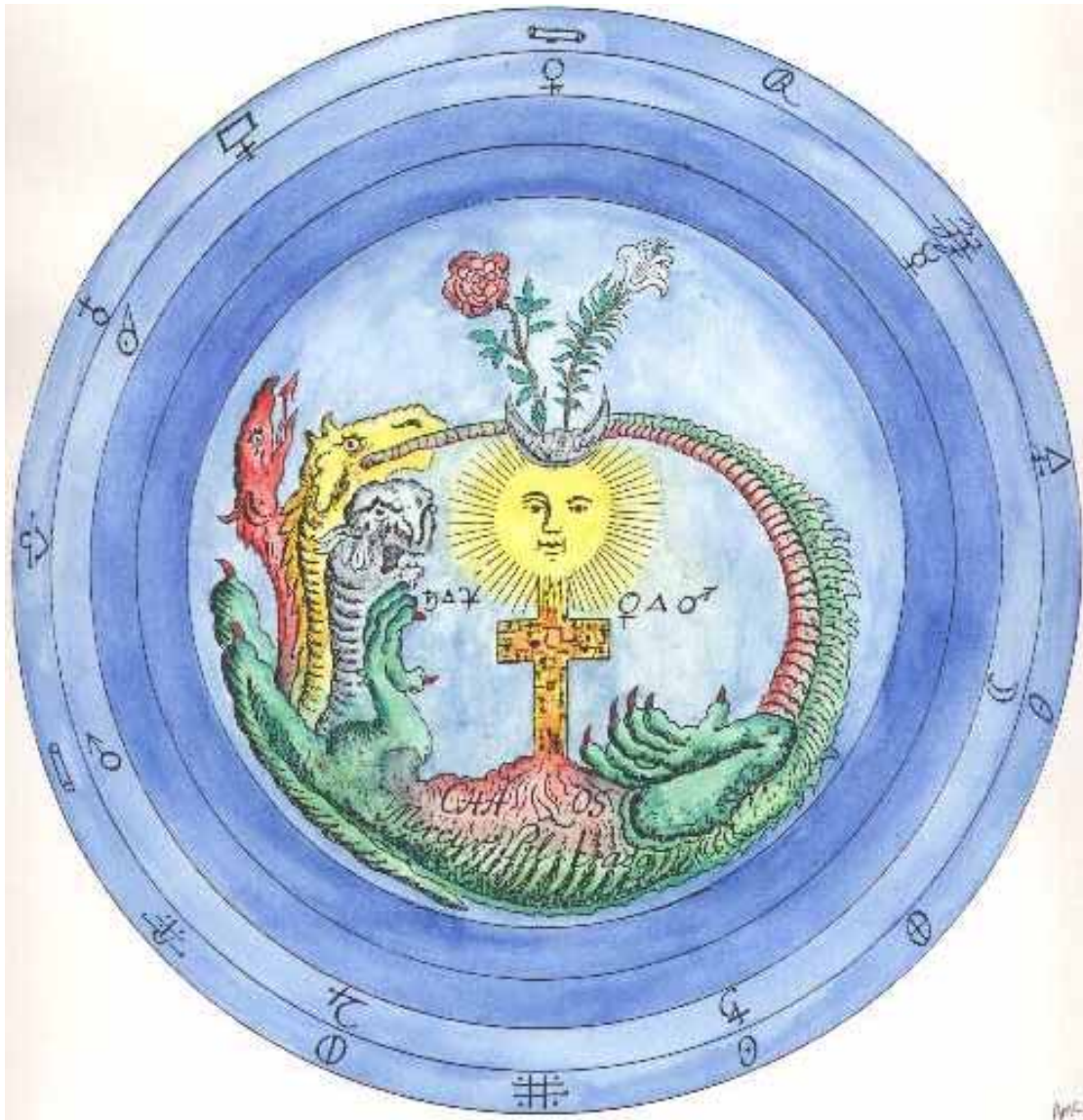
Example 6. Image from Valentine 'Azoth' series.



Example 7. From a 15th century manuscript in the British Library, Harley 2407.



Example 8. Redrawn from a manuscript in the Manly Palmer Hall collection.



Example 9. . Redrawn from a 14th century manuscript in Cracow of Al-Razi's 'Opera Medicinalia'.

