

# Adam McLean's Study Course on alchemical sequences

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## Lesson 3 : Cabala mineralis

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This work was never printed and appears to only exist in two manuscripts - one in the British Library and another in a private collection in France. Although is relatively late being dated to the last part of the 17th century, it has some parallels to *the Most precious gift of God* sequence which we looked at in the previous lesson. The manuscript has two distinct sections. The first section is obviously based on physical alchemical work, while the second section is more allegorical. This manuscript provides us with an opportunity of seeing a sequence based on the allegorisation of laboratory work with a parallel 'spiritual' allegory. Although it is not a major alchemical work and may not have widely circulated it does give us a glimpse of the attempt of an individual at integrating these two aspects of alchemy.

In the manuscripts the first section consists of seven double page openings.



The first double page illustration shows how the prime matter is drawn from the various realms of Nature. We see a basin being filled with various substances. From a plant with three blue flowers, nectar or dew-drops drip down into the vessel providing an essence of the vegetable kingdom, while the man urinating into it is providing an essence of the animal realm. The three birds perching above the plant seem to be exhaling a vapour which descends towards the basin (it is difficult to see this in the illustration but it can be readily seen in the original manuscript). Just above the basin we see the word 'ponticitas'. This is a term often used in 17th century alchemy meaning a water, or liquid which dissolves substances, penetrating them and turning them into a liquid.

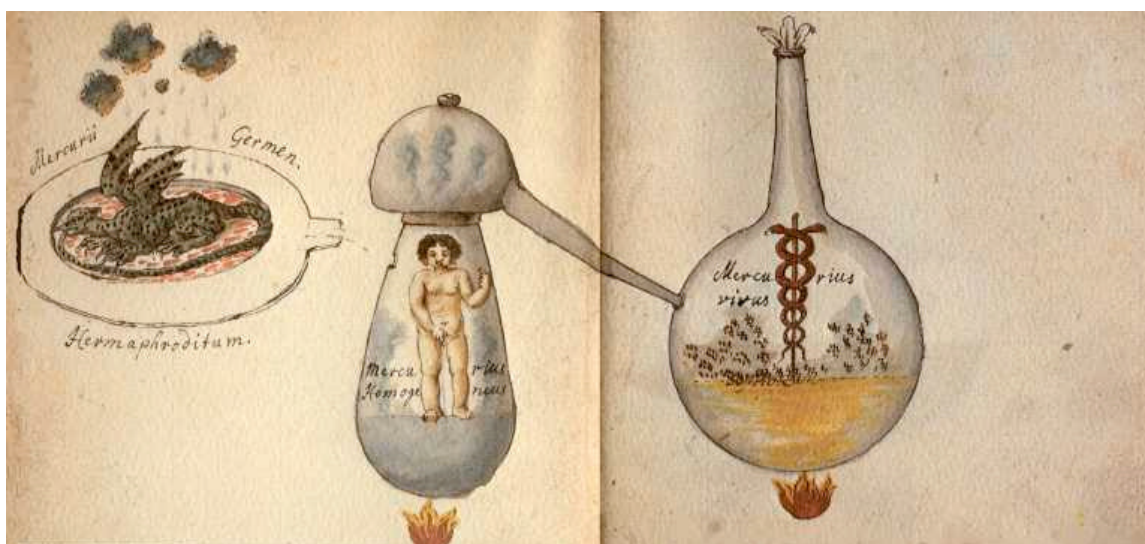
Our substance is openly displayed before the eyes of all, and yet is not known. Oh, how marvellous is our heaven, and our water, and our mercury, and our saltpetre which are in the world sea, and our vegetable, and our fixed and volatile sulphur, and our dead head, or dregs of our sea, and our water that does not wet the hands, and without which no mortal can live -- without which nothing is born or generated in the whole world! It is lightly esteemed by men, yet no one can do without it: for it is more precious than all the world beside, and, in short, it is nothing but our **pontic-water** which is congealed in the sun and moon and extracted from the sun and moon, by means of our chalybs (steel) through the skill of the Sages by a philosophical artifice and in a surprising manner . . .

Sendivogius *The New Chemical Light*

All this can be accomplished with our **Pontic and Catholic water**, which in its reflux course irrigates and fertilizes the whole earth, and is sweet, beautiful, clear, limpid, and brighter than gold, silver, carbuncles, or diamonds. This blessed water is enclosed and contained in our Matter.

*Waterstone of the wise.*

The man with the hourglass on his head labelled 'mercury' is obtaining some mineral from under the tree - the word 'fodina' beside him means "a place from which a mineral is dug".



The second illustration shows the material in the basin, now seen as a dragon ouroboros, being poured into an alembic flask fitted with a still head. Inside the flask this matter



becomes the 'mercurius Homogeneous' (or, as it has in the text below, 'homogenitas') Mercury born in the form of a human being. The essence of this material is being distilled over into the receiving flask, and here it appears in the form of the caduceus as the living mercury - 'Mercurius vivus'.

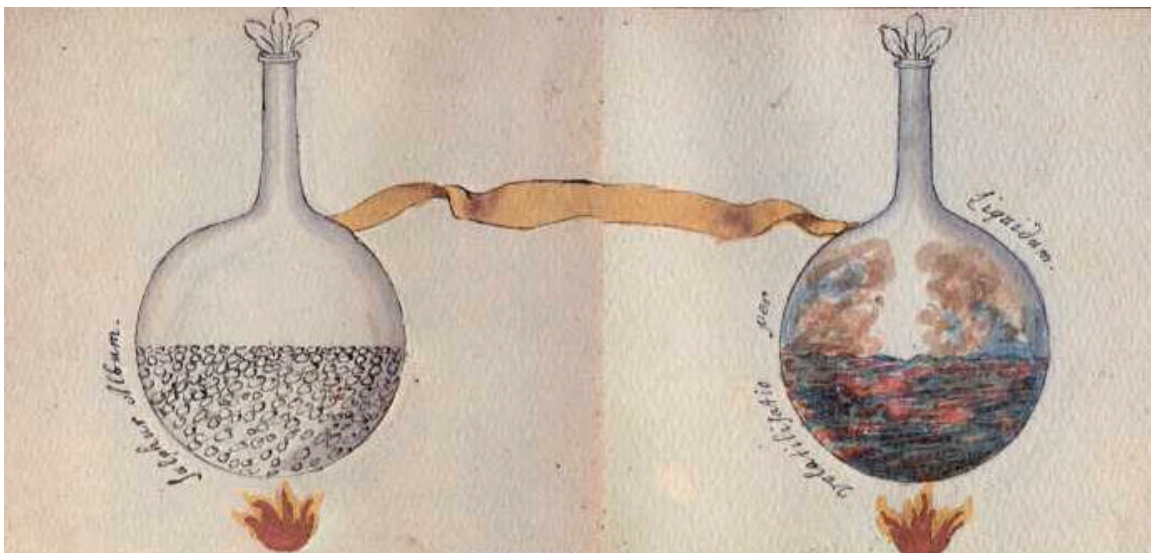
In the manuscript the drawings appear on double page openings, but they are perhaps best seen as forming a single figure. Though this may not seem so obvious in the next illustration, the later flasks are tied together in pairs using a banner above them.



The next illustration show a stage of calcination towards blackness. Here the fire below the flasks is beginning to turn the matter black. In the first of these flasks we see that the winged cherub or angel has a moon on its belly while in the second this is a sun. The text indicates that the moon and sun can be dissolved in the mercury prepared in the previous page. For the moon to become dissolved and calcined requires five eagles while the sun must pass through a mercury of seven eagles. We remember from the foundation course that birds were often used to reflect the idea of rising up and returning again in a controlled way. Thus some alchemists (especially in the 17th century) used the term "eagle" to refer to a circulation through volatilisation and condensation. The creator of this particular sequence saw that the moon (or perhaps the metal silver) required five circulations to become calcined and dissolved in the mercury while the sun (or gold) required seven such cyclings to become unified with the mercury in the flask. The creator of this sequence may be drawing a parallel with the process of amalgamation, where the noble metals become dissolved in metallic mercury, though we note from the first two illustrations that we are not dealing here with metallic mercury. Indeed, the opening illustration, which seems to be presenting us with the prima materia of this process, in its focussing on nitre and sal ammoniac, would rather suggest that the 'Mercurius vivus', the mercury made from living things, is here intended as aqua regia, the mixture of nitric and hydrochloric acids, which could be made from distilling nitre and sal ammoniac. This is the only acid that can dissolve gold.

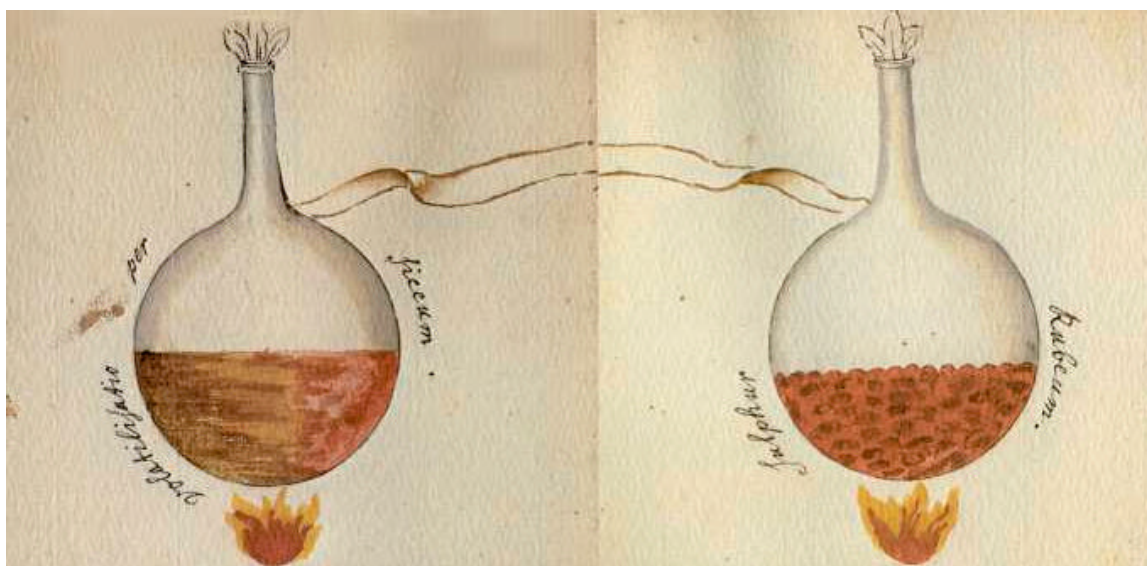


The next stage begins with putrefaction - or more correctly 'sophic putrefaction'. The text indicates that more mercury (mercurius vivus) is added and the calcined sun becomes resolved into one black body. But almost immediately it begins to green and the alchemist sees some changes which can be paralleled with the springing forth of vegetation, the germination.



This leads on to a stage of whiteness. Here our sun, which had become green, now becomes white, and the alchemist refers to this stage as the formation of the white sulphur. The alchemist further indicates that here the body, which had become as if dead in the calcination and putrefaction, has become animated by its incorruptible soul. Again we note the theme of death and rebirth seen in the previous two series we have explored.

The alchemist continues with the heating of his material, melting the white sun, during which many colour changes appear and are associated with the peacock's tail. The white sun becomes volatilised from a liquid state. In the second flask we clearly see the liquid and the vapours rising from it and the alchemist wants to make this quite explicit by stating this again in the text "it is being volatilised from a liquid".



The next stage, by contrast, is a volatilisation through dryness. Having been made a liquid in the last stage, through continued heating it is dried up and becomes a radiant shining body. The text presents this like the appearance of a dawn sunrise. In the second member of our pair of flasks our sun is now turned into the beautiful and reddest grains of the red sulphur. We see here a mirror inversion of the last pair. In the previous pair the white sulphur, with its white grains is heated and becomes liquid from which volatile fumes emerge, but in our following pair, the liquid is dried up and the volatile component is now changed through a dawn sunrise into the grains of red sulphur.





This red sulphur, though much desired by the wise, is not the end of the alchemical work. The red sulphur must be pushed through another fermentation by an imbibition, that is, by drinking in a liquid. The text states "This red sulphur is imbibed with five parts of its bodies weight of fresh mercury, gradually and by degrees, through seven separate imbibitions, and the sequence is revolved in heat in the wheel of nature in one month". We are being led back here to the first pair of flasks in which the little winged angels with moon and sun, were made to go through a calcination requiring five eagles (or circulations) and seven eagles respectively. Now again we see a winged angel in the flask which is being heated for one month. At the end of this period the fire is extinguished and what remains in the flask is the stone of the wise, the medicine of the third order, which can transmute all metals. The text states "the omnipotent king or our stone arises", and again we see a connection to the imagery of the death and resurrection of the king in the Petrus Bonus series. We can also note that the Petrus Bonus series uses the idea of cycles of volatilisation, there called "angels" while here we have "eagles".

We can thus come to view this series as being deconstructed into two sub sections.

|                   |    |                            |    |                         |
|-------------------|----|----------------------------|----|-------------------------|
| Image 1           | -> | Image 2                    | -> | Image 3                 |
| The prima materia |    | Preparation of the Mercury |    | The initial Calcination |

Flasks image 4 — Flasks image 5

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Flasks image 6 — Flasks image 7

This first part of the *Cabala mineralis* is a relatively clear sequence in which the alchemical process is shown as taking place in a series of flasks. The alchemist avoids being specific about the substances involved and is not precise in his details of quantities or exact method, but we can see that the alchemist who created this sequence has his work rooted in alchemical experimentation though, as in the other series we have looked at, he allegorises and uses imagery and text descriptions which lead us from the laboratory into the symbolic and philosophical. He goes further in the second part of his manuscript in which he presents a sequence founded entirely on the symbolic and philosophical.

The first image of this second sequence seems to parallel that of the first. Again we are in a landscape. Instead of the alchemist gathering his prima materia, here we appear to have God creating the heavens and the earth, the ultimate expression of the prima materia.



The next two pages have four roundels, each showing the process of creation as outlined in Genesis, with the division of the waters, the heavens above from the heavens below. This follows other such depictions, for example the series in the *Hermetic Musaeum* called 'Janitor pansophus', "the all wise doorkeeper", which you can see on the alchemy web site at



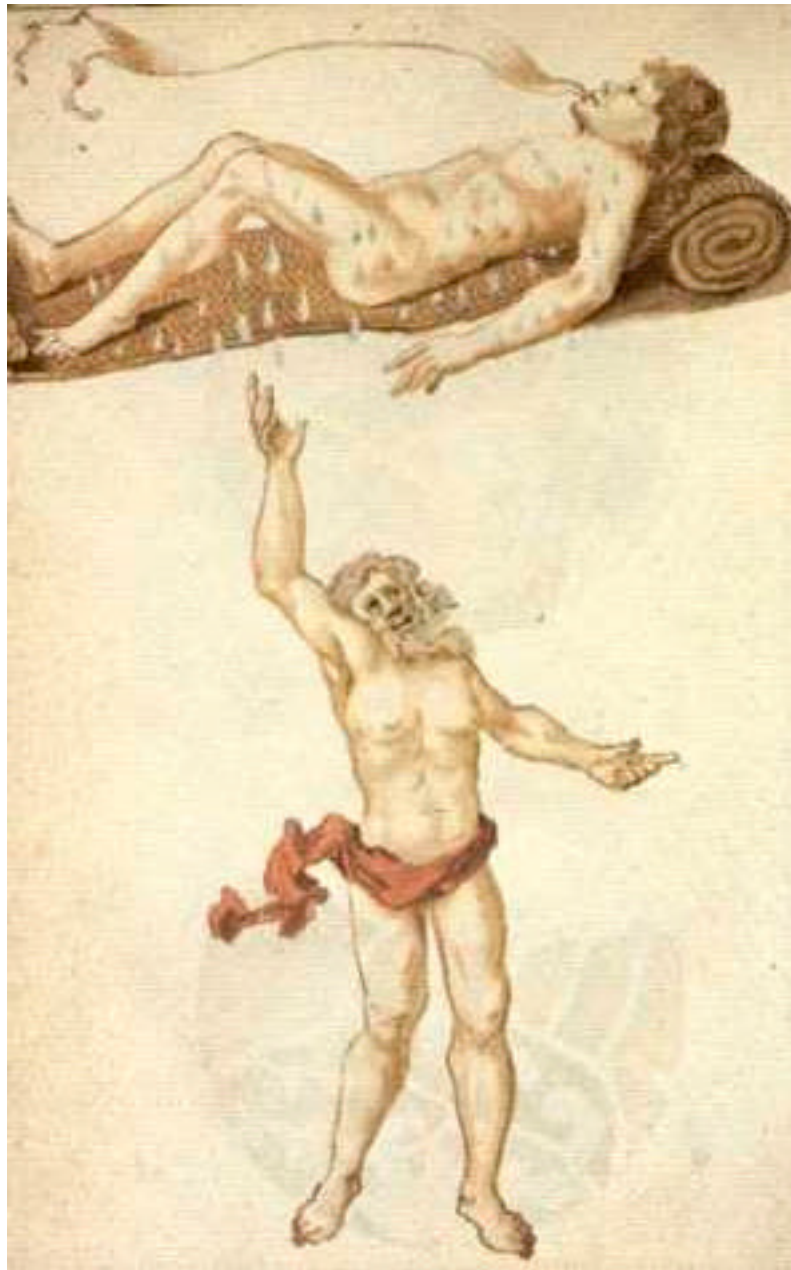
[http://www.levity.com/alchemy/amcl\\_doorkeeper.html](http://www.levity.com/alchemy/amcl_doorkeeper.html)

In our *Cabala mineralis* sequence, each of these roundels has a fire in the centre foreground, which the alchemist surely wants us to see as the driving energy of the process of creation. In the first two roundels we are in the early days of creation where the light is separating from the darkness and the waters above from the waters below. This occurs on the second and third days of the Genesis account.





In the next two roundels, the heavens with the sun, moon and stars has separated off from the earth. The third roundel seems to show the work of the third fourth and fifth days, with the creation of the sea creatures, plants and rivers. In the fourth roundel we have the sixth day with the creation of the animals. Curiously, instead of the creation of Adam we seem to have an Eve figure shown being created by the hand of God emerging from the clouds. This departs even further from the Biblical account when we note that Eve is created apparently holding the apple of the forbidden fruit in her hand. This is truly an alchemical conception rather than a religious one. This seems to reflect the idea we saw in the Petrus Bonus series where the body of the dead king had to be buried with his son who killed him in order for the alchemical transformation to proceed. Here in the *Cabala mineralis*, the whole religious idea of sin is thrown away in favour of the more alchemical idea that the primal human is being created together with the substance of its own fall - the spiritual and the material are ever interwoven in alchemy.



The remaining two pages are more enigmatic, but perhaps just continue the theme of death and resurrection. In the first, a bearded old man points upwards with his right hand, asking us to consider the man lying on a bed above sweating droplets which almost fall down like raindrops. With his right hand he points to the vigorous youthful man in the second image, who stands not below a dying human figure but instead has an angel flying above him. These two pages are very enigmatic and it may be impossible in the absence of any explanatory text to fully understand these images, but, placed in the context of this series, we can sense some reflection of the idea of alchemical transformation.





Taken as a whole the *Cabala mineralis* is a fine attempt by a 17th century English alchemist to integrate the various aspects of the alchemical work. The first part is a well articulated exploration of the alchemical process seen as a physical work yet attempting to interweave the allegorical and symbolic. This alchemist was not just describing a physical process but one which has more general resonances. In particular, he wanted us to see the alchemical process as in some way paralleling the process of creation as shown in the Biblical account, though he filters this through his own idiosyncratic alchemical interpretation.

## Exercises.

A translation of the short sections of text associated with the emblems can be seen on the web site at :

[http://www.levity.com/alchemy/cab\\_min1.html](http://www.levity.com/alchemy/cab_min1.html)

What is the connection between the first part of the book and the second? The obvious answer is that perhaps the alchemist is here trying to draw a parallel between the alchemical process in the flasks, and the process of the creation of the world as outlined in the biblical account in Genesis. Try and explore the parallels, though do not be too disappointed if you find little clear links here. The relationship between the first and second parts of this manuscript are not obviously stated.

As an alternative to the way I have analysed the flask here in pairs, try to find other ways of exploring the sequence by seeing it as a series of ten stages. Can you make a coherent reading of these flasks as forming ten stages?

Explore the internal symmetries of symbolism in the main transmutational part of the sequence.

Flasks image 4 — Flasks image 5

| |

Flasks image 6 — Flasks image 7

The *Most precious gift of God* sequence also presents a series of flasks within which a process is seen unfolding. Can you identify differences between these two presentations?