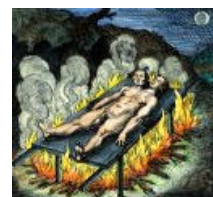


Adam McLean's Study Course on alchemical sequences



Lesson Nine : Speculum veritatis

The *Speculum veritatis*, "the mirror of truth", seems only to exist in one manuscript, Codex Latinus 7286 in the Vatican library. It probably dates to the early 17th century, and consist of a series of 12 drawings, each with a short Latin text. An engraved version of this series was made for a book of the works of Eireneus Philalethes *Mercurius de Mercurio* printed in 1695. The original images were pen drawings, but I have here coloured these to make the symbolism more apparent and hopefully easier to read.

This work will be seen to be similar to the *Theatre of Terrestrial Astronomy* we looked at in the last lesson. We have what appears on the surface to be a depiction of a physical laboratory process, but again the physical process is wrapped in an allegorical series of images, that seems to be pointing us to alchemical principles rather than describing an actual laboratory procedure.

This series of 12 emblems can be analysed as four groups of three, based on common elements in the emblems.

- 1 - 2 - 3 Each of these shows a descent of an influence from the heavens.
- 4 - 5 - 6 These show the work of purification in a outdoor laboratory
- 7 - 8 - 9 Each of these emblems is based around the common element of a tree
- 10 - 11 - 12 These show a process taking place in a furnace through three stages.

There are a number of key symbolic figures which appear often throughout the series.

The two alchemical philosophers.
Vulcan shown with his wooden leg
Mercury
The hen with her eggs.

Other familiar alchemical symbols make their appearance, the serpent and the king being the most obvious. As an exercise you should work through these 12 emblems listing the alchemical symbols that are depicted.

Emblems 1 - 2 - 3

This initial group seems to be trying to show that we must obtain the prime matter in order to begin the alchemical work. These three emblems bear the explanatory titles, which echo this quest for the prime matter.

1. The confused and dark matter sustained by the astral sulphurous sign.
2. The purgation of the matter and the reduction of the crude offspring into the cooked parent, so that its urine may wash mercury.
3. The union of natures with the Saturnine washing of mercury through the separation of darkness.

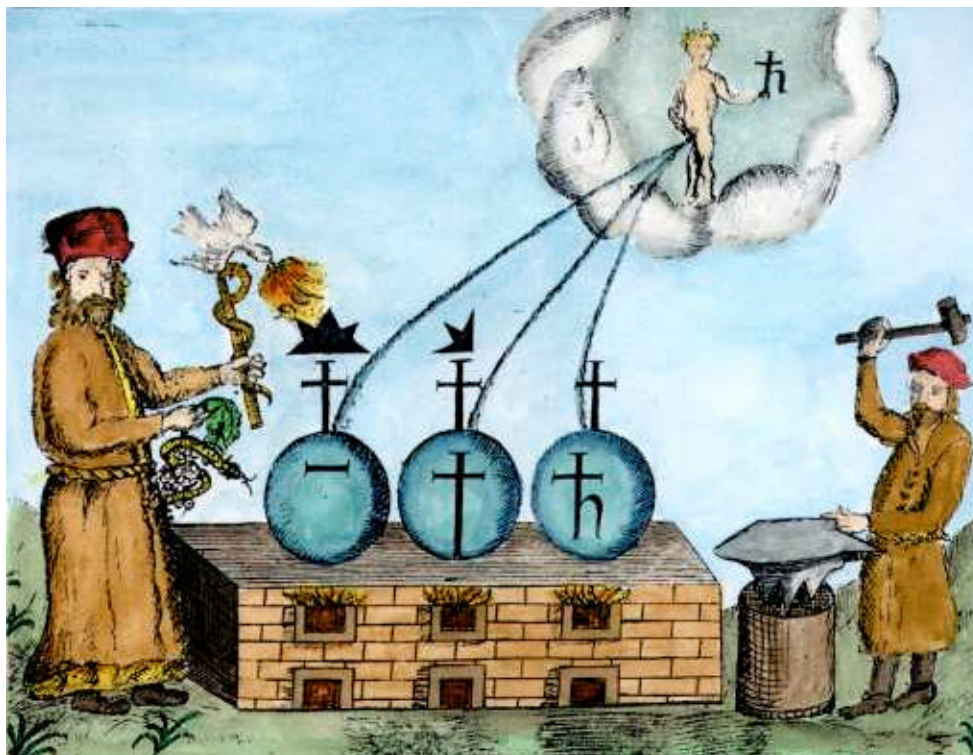
Emblem 1



On the left we note a grey wolf devouring a martial figure. In alchemy the grey wolf is sometimes linked with the practice of burning off the dross from an impure metal by using another metal (often Antimony) as a kind of flux, thus giving rise to a purer metal.

The armoured knight (Vulcan) seems to be in the act of handing a globe, which contains a star, precipitated from the heavens, over to the two alchemical philosophers who are to be seen throughout this sequence. At the beginning of the alchemical work the two philosophers on the right must recognise the prime matter they are to work with in their process.

Emblem 2



The two alchemical philosophers have taken the flask they obtained in the first illustration and placed it onto a long low furnace. (Although three flasks appear here, they surely represent a process of three stages, as above the first flask we see a five pointed symbol, while above the second this is cut in half, and finally disappears above the third flask. Also inside the flask we see, firstly a short horizontal bar, in the second joined by a longer vertical, and finally completed in the third when it forms the familiar alchemical symbol for Saturn or lead. Saturn appears in the heavens and sends down three streams into the flasks below. Thus the second illustration seems to show the purgation of the initial *materia confusa*, by means of some Saturnine forces. This could indicate a washing of the crude matter in molten lead. The alchemical philosopher on the left holds in his left hand a rod with a serpent, a kind of half caduceus, on top of which a bird is perched, breathing fire towards the flasks. In his right hand he holds a vine with a bunch of grapes around which another serpent coils. The philosopher on the right is beating on an anvil, again perhaps a reference to the purification of metals through smelting.

Emblem 3



In this third image, again a Saturnine manikin sends down a stream of urine into an open vessel which the two alchemical philosophers have set on a base. At their feet are a number of flasks each containing a Saturn symbol, echoing the three flasks on the previous illustration. Six of these flasks have a number '7' beside them. In addition to this, the alchemist on the right holds another similar flask with a number seven in his left hand. Thus there are seven flasks with the number '7'. If we add these together we get '49' and this is the number that appears beside the little figure of Mercury with caduceus that is being held aloft in the right hand of the alchemist. One could interpret these as time periods, say days, during which the work of this stage needs to proceed in order to reach its completion. The open vessel in the centre bears the number '56' which is $49 + 7$, which could indicate that this process goes for seven days in each of the closed flasks then a further seven in the open vessel. On the right we see three other flasks without numbers, these may be a reference to the three flasks of the stage indicated in the second illustration. Above these flasks is a fountain with a lion-like head pouring forth a stream of water into a basin. Further behind is a tall furnace also bearing the number '56'. From out of a hole at the top of the furnace comes a bird, but this is scored out. Perhaps this is a reference to making sure that the volatile part of the substance does not fly away though too much heat. On the left two figures approach the alchemists at their work. One is a naked man with a loincloth of leaves, and a leafy garland on his head. He holds out a serpent and gestures to the alchemists. Beside him is a woman holding out a bird in her left and an arrow or pointed lance in her right hand. These two seem to be bringing male and female aspects to the attention of the alchemists - the male figure in particular, as a wild man of the forest, seems to incorporate a kind of primal vegetative energy. On the brick platform above these two, the uniting of the male and female aspects is further emphasised as a rooster impregnates a

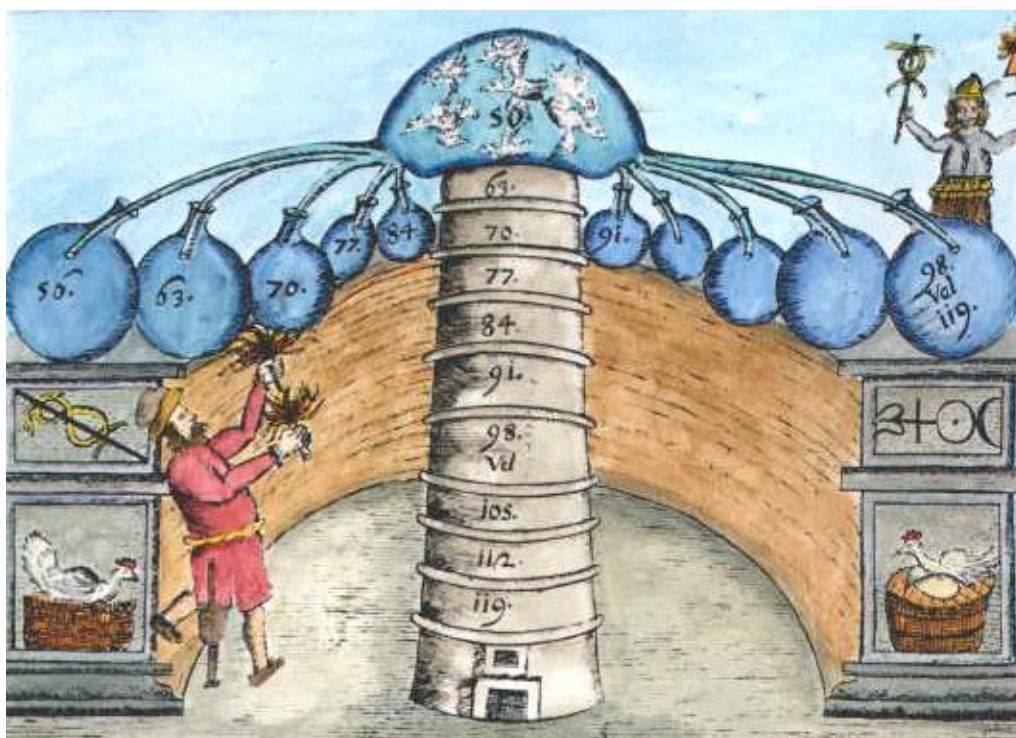
hen. The hen or its egg will appear in six of these illustrations as a key element in this process. The alchemist in the centre seems to be holding a scroll which possibly shows that he had received some knowledge to enable him to work the process. The text has the statement “joining the natures” here possibly the male and the female, as indicated by our rooster and hen or the two human figures, “with the saturnine washing of mercury”, that is, the results of the first two stages of this process.

Emblems 4 - 5 - 6

This second group of three emblems seem to be indicating that the alchemical philosophers must now work upon the primal material with their mercury.

4. Vulcan plucks the birds in flight, and the hen lays the egg, and it may be the hermaphroditic mercury.
5. The philosophers worship their prepared mercury, and some offer gold to it, which not all philosophers do.
6. This, our mercury, is washed from external filth.

Emblem 4



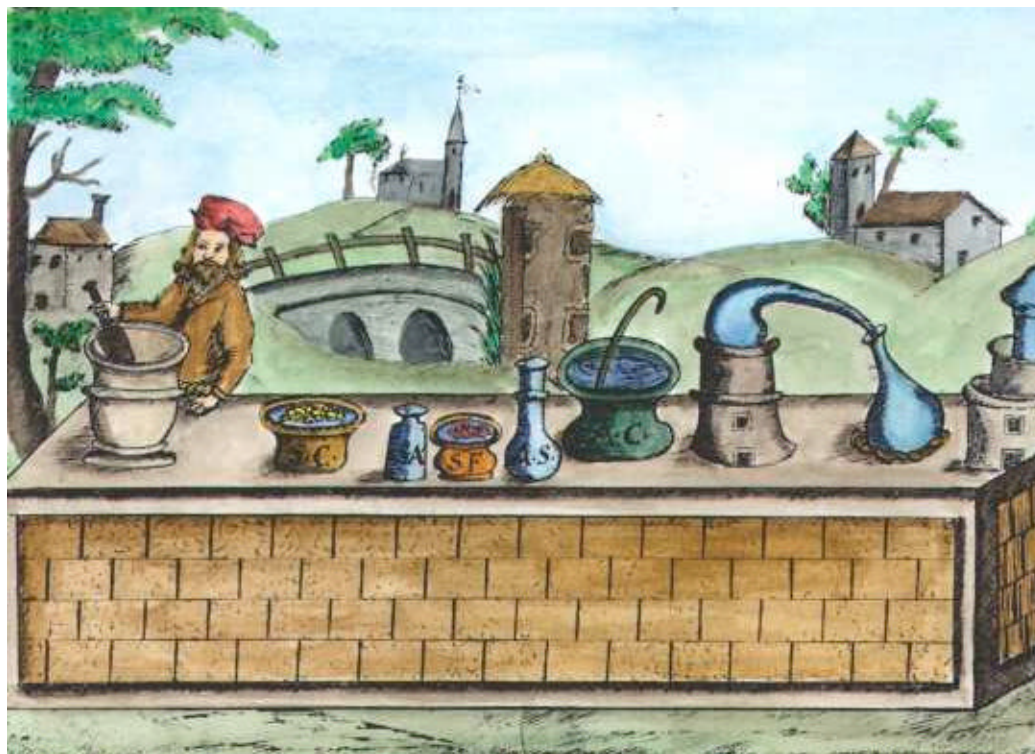
A tall cylindrical furnace in the form of a tower heats a large alembic with ten spouts which lead down into ten receiving flasks. A series of ten numbers appear starting in the head of the alembic and proceeding down the column of the furnace: 56 - 63 - 70 - 77 - 84 - 91 - 98 - 105 - 112 - 119. Following the idea presented in the previous illustration these may be periods of seven days. These numbers also appear in the ten flasks. The person who drew the manuscript left out the numbers from three of the flasks on the right, but it is obvious that these were intended to be placed there. The appearance of the statement “98 vel 119” may suggest that two alternatives are being presented. In the alembic head we see a number of birds - these are the volatile aspect of the substance that will be collected in the receiving flasks. It may be that we do not here actually have ten flasks, but instead a distillation taking place over seven days collected in a single flask - then the product placed back into the alembic and redistilled ten times in all. This is the classic circulation of the alchemists. The two alternatives presented are, circulating this seven times to 98 days or ten times until 119 days have passed. On the left of the furnace Vulcan stands below the flasks holding in each hand a flaming torch, similar to the figure on the first illustration. On the right above the flasks stands a Mercury figure, holding his caduceus in his right and a flaming Sulphur symbol in his left hand. The flasks are supported by a semicircular wall. On the left of this is a caduceus symbol, underneath which is a hen sitting on her nest. On the right of this wall is John Dee’s hieroglyphic Monad symbol, immediately below which the hen is shown having now laid her egg in the nest. The text indicates that the egg may be a kind of hermaphroditic mercury. This may be partly shown symbolically as it comes under the sign of the hieroglyphic Monad which incorporates or integrates all the planetary symbols, and thus contains the male and female, as Sun and Moon, Mars and Venus, in one unified hermaphroditic form. It also comes under the sign of Mercury who appears above the flasks.

Emblem 5



Our philosophers appear beside the egg, with which they are symbolically working. They remove their caps in homage to this key stage of the work. The egg has a serpent forming an ouroboros within it. This can be seen as symbolising the egg eating or working upon itself, nourishing itself, transforming itself. Mercury stands on the egg as a guardian of the process. He holds his caduceus and a flaming sulphur symbol just as he did in the previous illustration. The alchemist on the left holds out the Sun. This may be an indication of gently warming the work in the flask with sunlight. There are a number of alchemical illustrations which show this - often using lenses or mirrors to concentrate the heat and light. The other alchemist seems to be pointing to the ouroboros, indicating the internal heat of the process, rather than an external one. The Sun may also be interpreted here as gold. The text states that they “offer gold to it” which might seem somewhat contrary to the image, though gold and the sun are symbolically the same in alchemy. It may be that here the alchemists must introduce gold into their process. This series provides little real information on the substances or processes it seems to outline.

Emblem 6



The sixth stage, which brings to a close the second group of three illustrations, shows one of our alchemists standing at a long bench manipulating various substances. Five of these are labelled with letters, but there is insufficient information to positively identify these. 'S.C.' could be 'sal communis', or 'combustible sulphur', 'A.C.' could be 'Aqua celestial' - there are many possibilities in expanding these contractions. This stage marks the end of the first half of the process, in which the mercury is finally purified from its external dross or impurities. From this point on, the work proceeds to a positive transformation.

Emblems 7 - 8 - 9

This group shows our alchemical philosophers now working further with the egg. The central image of a tree dominates this section of the sequence.

7. The egg which needs to be kept warm is given to agonising Vulcan, in order that a natural chick may be born out of it.
8. The hen keeps the nascent egg warm, Cadmus has fixed the snake to the oak tree, and our mercury kills the king.
9. Cadmus turns the wheel, and he fixes the first pointer to our sulphur, and so through the first rotation the created sun of the philosophers is obtained.

Emblem 7



Under a tree the two alchemical philosophers approach Vulcan and give him their eggs. The one on the left offers two eggs and holds also a Sun disc, while the other alchemist on the right holds out a single egg. Vulcan will place these into his furnace which has a long necked and a short necked flask set within it, while from the top of the furnace emerges an oak tree. Vulcan controls the heat that will bring the process to completion.

Emblem 8



The oak tree which formerly grew from Vulcan's furnace now has in its branches the hen on a nest brooding her egg. On the ground below, Cadmus pins a serpent to the trunk of the tree with his sword. In his other hand he holds the flaming sulphur symbol. Cadmus, in Greek mythology, is the hero who killed the dragon guardian of the Castalian Spring and sowed its teeth in the ground, from which a host of armed men sprung up and fought each other till only five remained. Cadmus was married to Harmonia, daughter of Ares (Mars) and Aphrodite (Venus), and obviously in classical mythology was intimately connected with the dragon or serpent. He also killed a snake by pinning it to a hollow oak. On the left Mercury, holding his caduceus downwards, kills the king with his sword. The sudden appearance of the king here seems inexplicable, but he may be connected to the solar element which was brought into the egg at a previous stage. Thus both the action of the external heat (or possibly addition of gold) and the internal energies of the snake in the egg, are extinguished now by Mercury and Cadmus.

Emblem 9



Cadmus now spins the wheel of alchemical processes which is fixed to the tree. It is divided into eight segments, seven corresponding to the traditional planets, and a special eighth section marked by wide hatched bands containing the symbol of sulphur in a circle, indicating the spiritual principle of sulphur. The planets are not in their usual order. Reading clockwise from the sulphur segment we first have Mercury whose stage shows various colours, then Saturn (the blackening), Jupiter an ashy or perhaps grey colour, Moon (whitening), then Venus which has a number of colours during its stage, viridian (green), rubeus (red), ceruleum pallidum or pale blue. Mars shows us 'flavidus obscurus' a hidden golden colour, also the Cauda Pavonis or peacock's tail with its variety of colours, then finally the Sun, citrine or golden yellow, but with a hidden purple 'purpura obscura'. Cadmus, still holding his flaming sulphur symbol in his left hand, turns the wheel of the planets and processes. Each division has a handle or spoke with which to help rotate the wheel and fixed at the centre is a pointer, which here is set to sulphur. The division set under sulphur shows no colour changes. "Cadmus turns the wheel, and he fixes the first pointer to our sulphur", this seems to mean that Cadmus thus presents us with a cycle of eight (or seven plus the quiescent phase of sulphur) alchemical processes which must be run through in sequence to develop the work. (In the Greek myth Cadmus is put in servitude for eight years for killing the serpent/dragon.) On the right we see old Vulcan, who sits with his lamp beside his furnace. This furnace has three sections, and from its top we see three flags, one with one pointer, another with two, and the topmost with three pointers. This indicates that Cadmus' cycle must be run through three times in all. When the wheel returns with its pointer to the sulphur section, then one cycle is complete.

Emblems 10 - 11 - 12

The final group of emblems shows the alchemical philosophers completing their process by tending their furnace through a threefold cycle. The texts here state.

10. The natural son of the sun, born of the egg of the wisemen by fermentation and feeding for a second time, and a third repeated turning of the wheel is affirmed with the triple pointer.

11. The kings of the Earth revere this fiery elixir ruling in the three kingdoms of nature.

12. Let it be multiplied only with milk, and it will reveal its virtue within the planets in the earth.

Emblem 10



The alchemical philosophers are now shown continuing the process of the previous illustration through a further cycle. This is indicated by the furnace on the right having lost its number '1' on its lower section as well as the lower of the flags. The alchemist on the right is feeding the hen who has now left her nest. In the nest we see the two parts of the eggshell - her chick has hatched. The chick, or the son of the Sun, is seen on the fiery circle above. This represents what is going on through this process. The son is in a crucible standing in the center of the fiery triangle set in a circle. At the bottom of the triangle we see two pointers indicating that the first cycling of the process has been done but the second is now in progress. The alchemist on the left holds up a sun disc and an egg. The sun disc has a '3' and the egg an '8'. These probably represent (as we saw before) the days of the

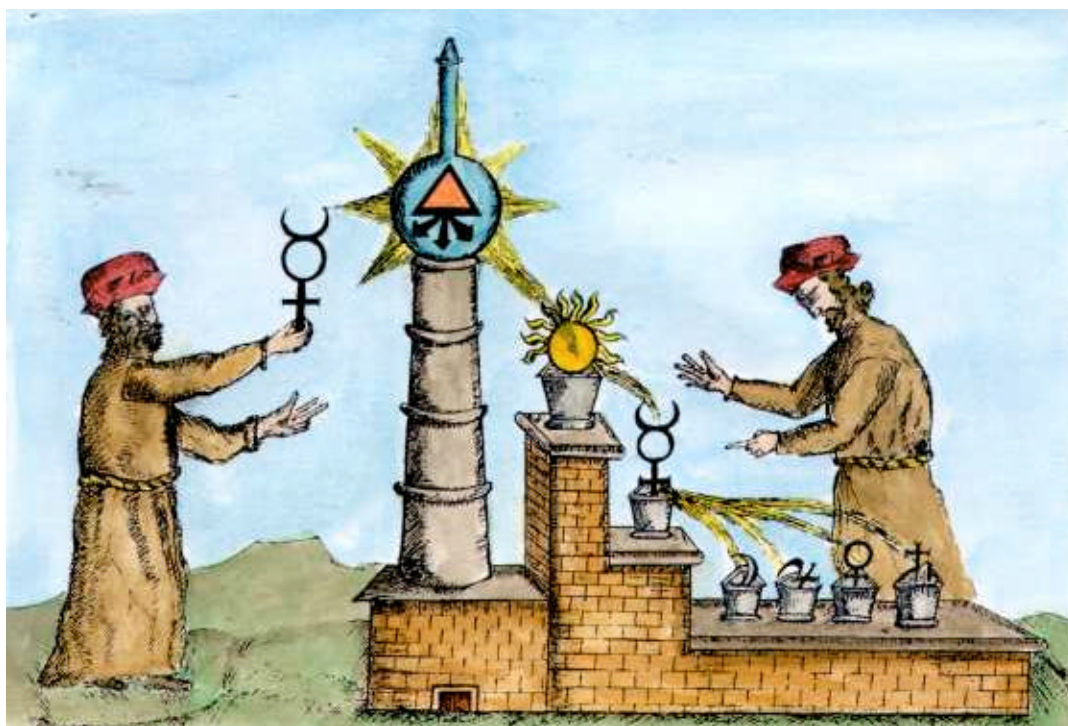
process. On a table before him is a single pointer, representing that the first cycle is done, and a triangle with two pointers attached, showing that the second and third cycles are still to be completed. The egg on the table between them shows an '11' which obviously is $8 + 3$. Thus each cycle may take 11 days.

Emblem 11



A king now kneels before the work in progress. This king is not related to the king figure that was killed in figure eight by Mercury. On the right the furnace shows the third cycling is underway and the previous two stages are complete. Thus the '1' and '2' are no longer shown on the furnace and only the topmost flag with the three pointers is seen. The fiery triangle in the circle now has three pointers and the son of the Sun in the crucible has now disappeared. Beneath the flaming circle is a globe of the Earth with three crowns set upon it. From the text these represent the three kingdoms of Nature - mineral, plant and animal. The king is showing due reverence to the fiery tincture that is being prepared as it will give him power over the three kingdoms of Nature and thus over the whole world.

Emblem 12



This final stage is the last of the series of three that focus around the three cycles of the alchemical process. Now the last cycling is complete. The furnace no longer bears any numbers or flags, but instead, the fiery triangle in a circle, which we saw in the previous two images, has now become the triangle with three pointers attached inside the flask set on top of the furnace. The alchemical philosopher on the left holds up the symbol of Mercury towards the work that is being completed, while his colleague on the right points to a Mercury symbol. Here the Mercury may be the milk, referred to in the text, with which the elixir is multiplied. The idea of multiplying an elixir in Mercury appears often in alchemical texts. From the completed alchemical work in the flask a ray descends into a triangular crucible and a Sun appears. From this another ray or stream pours down to a lower step of the furnace to the Mercury symbol, and from its crucible a further ray or stream proceeds, splitting into four, and descending into four crucibles bearing the symbols of Moon, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn. Thus the perfection of the alchemical work, the fiery tincture, proceeds and descends down into the other metals. The transformative tincture, the spiritualisation of the mineral realm which is the goal of alchemy, is now brought to completion.

This sequence presents us with what on the surface appears as a physical laboratory process, but it becomes obvious on contemplating it more deeply that there is insufficient information on just how to proceed with such an experiment. The materials necessary are not identified, and neither is any precise laboratory procedure. Instead, we are shown such archetypal processes as purification and distillation. The key aspects of this process appear to be allegorical, the egg, the serpent, the tree, the wheel of the planets, the triple furnace, the classical references to Cadmus and Vulcan. What is set before us in the *Speculum veritatis* is more an allegorical process than a physical one. Like the *Theatre of Terrestrial Astronomy*, this work is a transitional one. In the 17th century some alchemists began to use sequences of images which were entirely independent of physical laboratory processes. Overlapping this were some transitional works in which allegorical aspects were introduced and overlaid upon laboratory processes. These can be difficult to read as there are many unresolved symbols, and the creator of such a sequence may not have entirely integrated within himself this emerging allegorical approach and fallen back on archetypal laboratory processes to structure the sequence. Perhaps some additional text or commentary will be found which throws some light on just how this sequence should be read.

As a further exercise it might be instructive to take the list you made of the symbols in each of the emblems and divide them into two groups. Those which distinctly reflect physical laboratory work and those which are entirely allegorical. There will be some also which fall into both categories.

Through contemplating a sequence such as this we can begin to appreciate the ways in which alchemists were drawn to use symbols allegorically. This sequence is really a hybrid. Its strong structure challenges us to read it both as depiction of a laboratory process and an allegorical exploration of alchemical principles.