

Adam McLean's Study Course on the Ripley Scroll

Lesson 2 : Identifying the components of the Scroll

On glancing at the Scroll one immediately forms the impression that it is structured with four main panels, each with an entirely different symbolic statement.

The work in the pelican flask
The two basins set around a central pillar
The bird of Hermes eating its wings
The dragon biting at the moon

There is a final figure in medieval dress which we will look at later.

To appreciate the Ripley Scroll as a whole we will have to explore the inner symbolic workings of each panel and also try and see just how these relate to one another. There is no immediately obvious symbolic thread linking the four panels, so they may seem to stand alone and independent of each other, however, an initial clue to their interlinking can be found in some short pieces of text on each panel.

First panel (The work in the pelican flask)

The black Sea. The black Luna. The black Sol.
Here is the last of the white stone, and the beginning of the red stone.

Second panel (The two basins)

(top heptangular basin) The white Sea. The white Luna. The white Sol
(bottom rectangular basin) The red Sea. The red Luna. The red Sol.

Third panel (The bird of Hermes eating its wings)

Here is the last of the Red, and the beginning to put away the Dead. The Elixir Vitae.

Fourth panel (The dragon biting at the moon)

The red Sea. The red Sol. The red Elixir vitae.
Red Stone. White Stone. Elixir vitae.

The first two panels seem to be describing a process that takes place through three

coloured 'seas', in the traditional alchemical order of Black - White - Red.

The last two panels introduce the idea of the Elixir vitae. Wings, also, seem especially important in the last two panels.

One common feature to the panels is that something is seen descending in the space of the emblem.

In the first two panels feathers are seen descending.

In the last two panels it is drops of liquid that descend.

In the first panel these feathers are coloured white, and are seen in the space between the cool top of the pelican flask down towards the dark liquid. Red drops are also seen descending down the inner surface of the flask, and they seem to rise up in a fountain that comes from the lower dark liquid and shoots through the toad. In the second panel, there are two different sets of feathers. Those on the left are golden and descend from the Sun, while those on the right are grey and descend from the Moon. Liquid does still descend in the second panel, but it is only suggested symbolically by the figures around the heptangular basin, who pour the contents of their flasks into the vessel.

In the third panel, it is golden yellow drops that descend from the Sun above, while in the fourth panel we see red drops of blood falling from the wounded dragon and gathering in the strange winged orb form.

The first two panels appear to be linked by their symbols reflecting something recognisably close to a physical alchemical process, the work in the flask and the baths of the second panel. Indeed, we could come to see this as a single emblem, as most of the scrolls show the upper branches of the tree in the second panel poking into the fiery furnace of the top panel. We may need to read these two panels together almost as a continuous emblem of an alchemical process.

In a similar way the last two panels are symbolically linked. Each have a winged creature standing on a circular form and set under either the Sun or Moon.

In the middle of the Scroll we have a short section, probably best seen as part of the second panel, in which a red and a green lion stand opposite each other around the open mouth of a furnace. This furnace bears the text "the mouth of choleric beware" and this echoes the furnace mouth of the first panel. It may be best to see these two lions in connection with the symbols placed on the lower front of the rectangular vessel, the green dragon and the toad with its tingeing venom, as the text below them "here is the fume which is the mouth of choleric" echoes that found with the two lions. Here we have a quaternary of symbols

Toad
with red tingeing venom

Green dragon

Red Lion

Green Lion

You will see here how I am following the approach I have demonstrated in my other study courses on alchemical symbolism, of trying to read this complex emblematic work from inside its own symbols, rather than trying to force external interpretations upon it. We have found that most alchemical emblems have their own internal logic. Once one grasps this, it then becomes possible to read the symbolic message of the emblems that constitute it. This has been the main theme of my study courses on alchemical symbolism.

So far we have analysed the links between the different 'panels' and are beginning to integrate the different symbolic parts of the Scroll into a few emblems that present the sequence of ideas that the author of the Scroll seems to have intended us to see.

We have so far ignored the man in medieval clothing at the bottom of the Scroll, because when we look at this final figure we are confronted with an image which does not immediately strike us as alchemical in itself.



What can this strange figure represent ? He carries a staff with a horses hoof on one end and with a quiver containing a quill pen and a roll of parchment on the other. At his belt, what might easily be mistaken for a purse, is actually an inkpot. He is, therefore, a scribe or secretary, by his dress more an itinerant notary or penman than a religious clerk, but at any rate the sort of person who might have made a copy of the Scroll. At the beginning or top of the Scroll stands another figure, the alchemist who places the flask onto the furnace. There would seem to be some intention of contrasting these two figures at the beginning and end of the scroll. Both seem to stand outside the symbolic emblematic action.

Some of the scrolls have the figure of a king set opposite the scribe. For example that in the manuscript in Edinburgh.



The following manuscripts depict this king : Edinburgh, Huntington, B.L. Add. 32621, and B.L. Add. 5025-4. These four manuscripts also include a section of text not found in the other manuscripts. Here is the text in my version which modernises the spelling :

In the Name of the Trinity
 Harke here and you shall see
 The author that formed this work
 Both first and last, bright and dark
 Some of them I shall you tell
 Both in rhyme and in verse
 Mallapides, Plato and Peion
 And the Book of Turba philosophorum

Both Aristotle Geber and Hermes
 Also Lully, Morien, and Rhazes
 Bonelles, Raymondus and Albert
 Arnold and Percy the Monk so black
 Aros and Rasces and also Dessrima
 The sister of Moses, Mary prophetess
 Bacon also the great Clarke
 Formed I know all this work
 All these account now in one
 That here is now the philosophers' stone
 Otherwise it may not be
 Understand this I counsel thee
 And pray thou God of his Grace
 That you may have time and space
 To have the truth of this parable
 Thank thou God that is so stable
 For many a man desires this
 Both Pope, Emperor and king
 Priest and Clarke and also friar
 And not so much but the very begger
 Now Jesus if it be thy will
 Keep us from the pains of Hell
 And as thou made days seven
 Bring us to the bliss of Heaven
 All manner of good men in their degree
 Amen amen for charity

Here the writer of these verses gives a list of the authors of the Scroll, choosing from among the major early writers on alchemy - Turba philosophorum, Geber, Hermes, Lully, Arnold, Bacon, Mary prophetess, Percy the Black monk, and so on. He says that many men desire the secret of the work of alchemy, both those of the status of kings and those more lowly clerks. A clerk in those days was a man in a religious order, a cleric, or clergyman. As the scholarship of the Middle Ages was practically limited to the clergy, and these performed all the writing, notarial, and secretarial work of the time, the name 'clerke' came to be equivalent to 'scholar', and specially applied to a notary, secretary, recorder, accountant, or penman. So here we see depicted examples of these two classes. Some commentators on the Ripley Scroll even go so far as to identify the clerk figure as Ripley himself. This and other similar interpretations requires one to impose a meaning onto a symbol such as this from outside the Scroll. If we stick to my more conservative view and interpret the image from inside the Scroll, in this case through the text, we should see the figures at the end of the Scroll as those who seek the secret of alchemy, and this is dualistically coupled with the alchemist at the top of the Scroll who obviously has the secret. The text in a banner around his head can be roughly translated : "Here is the hidden stone buried in the secret fountain. It transforms into the ferment or stone, which tinges everything".

Another way of looking at the final figure is a more satirical one. The scroll in the Yale collection has a little phylactery or banner of parchment beside the final figure stating

Ve mihi miser qua olium operam perdidit

Woe is me, a miserable man who has completely lost my time and trouble.

This is not found in other scrolls, so we should just view this as a later humorous addition, perhaps added by a copyist who may not have been very impressed by alchemy.

The Huntington Library copy has another satirical Latin phrase at the end of the scroll.

si queras in merdis secreta philosophorum expensum perdis opera tempus que laborem

If you seek the secrets of the philosophers in dung, you will waste your expenditure of time and labour on this work.

The British library manuscript Add. 5025-4, uniquely has a piece of text as the tailpiece.

Thus with all I am content

To shew this comely Ornament.

Of these types and Figures your eyes doth beholde

Mervellous matter the hidden sence doth unfolde

But how and in what manner the same is effected

In a written booke it is plainly directed

Of the very ancient and most strange operation

By Calcination and Sublimation

Elevation and perfect Fixation

To be good in Tincture and in Malliation

In poys [weight] good, and in test the true probation

And many things els this worke doth unfold

Which at this time is too long to be told

What shall I say that Man then maketh Gold

Nay God forbid, we will not be soe bold

For when a Man doth all his whole intent

What is he but a simple Instrument

By whom God works and Nature brings to pass

The very same, by Art that compast wast

Where Nature left, there Art doth but begin

That perfectness that Nature could not winne

Few words I meane at this time for to make

This have I done for all true Students sakes.

These verses perhaps delightfully sum up the Scroll. The author suggests that in the figures and symbols of this work, the hidden sense is revealed, compressed into these emblematic images. It shows the secrets of the alchemical operations, of calcination, sublimation, elevation and fixation, and we see these clearly enough in the vertical polarities, the things ascending and descending throughout the images on the Scroll we have now identified. The last verse makes the point that although it might be said that alchemy works against God's order in making gold, in reality the alchemist is but a simple instrument by whom God and Nature bring their work to completion. This sentiment reflects the inner struggle of a churchman involved in alchemy, and comes to an excellent solution to this problem.

Please work through the ideas I am presenting here by following them up on the imagery of the Scroll. See if you can find other ways in which the structure of the Scroll reveals itself through the association and interlinking of the individual symbols that make up each of the emblem.

As an exercise, you could try and uncover other symbolic links between the different components of the Scroll. Pay particular attention to vertical polarities. Set these out in tables as I have done above as this will help you to see the structure. At this point in our investigation we should not be trying to read or interpret the Scroll, merely to discover the structure. The more in depth analysis of the symbolism and the text, which we shall pursue in the next lessons, will be necessary before we can attempt a reading of the Scroll.

We started with seeing the Scroll as having four panels, but on looking deeper more structure has emerged.

The work in the pelican flask and two basins set around a central pillar, seem to form a continuous emblematic narrative. There is then a linking section of the Dragon-toad and red and green lions. Finally the two panels with the winged figures, which seem to mirror one another.

Once we grasp the overall structure of the Ripley Scroll, it will be possible to read its emblems in a coherent way. There will be no need to import ideas from outside the Scroll, as all the clues are found within its frame.