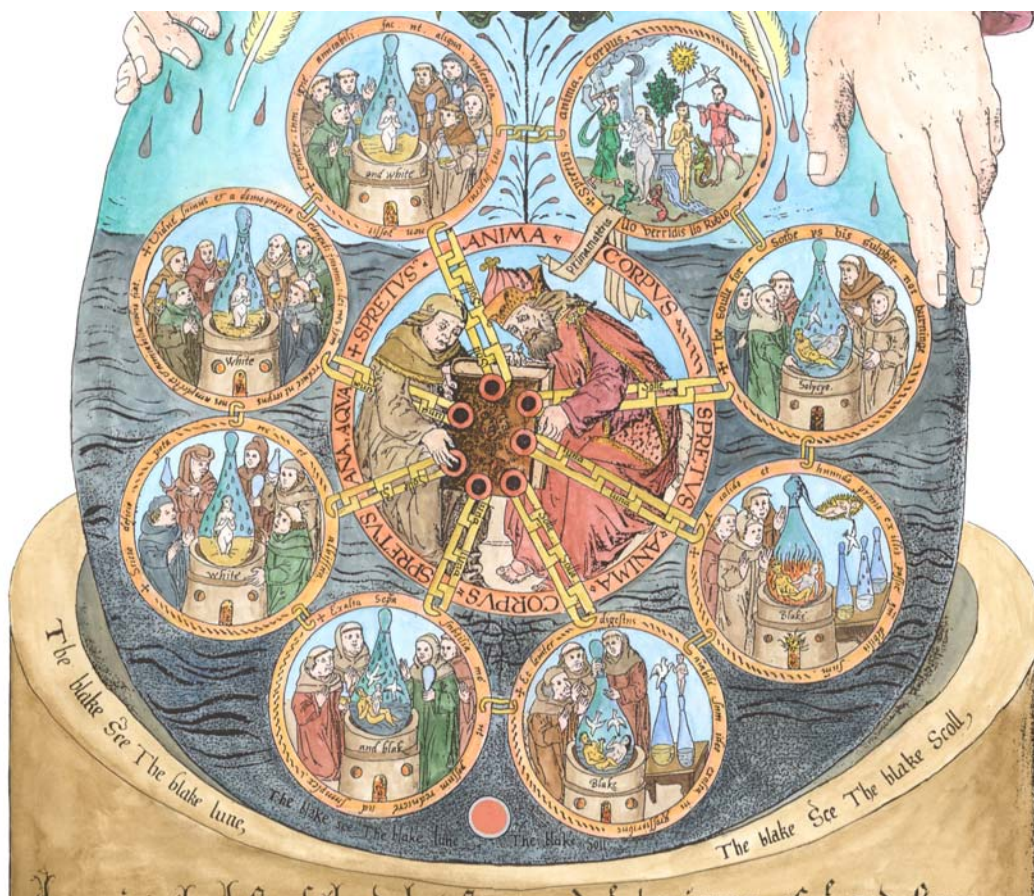


# Adam McLean's Study Course on the Ripley Scroll

## Lesson 3 : The sequence within the sequence

The main focus of this lesson will be the sequence within the sequence. In the first main panel in the scroll, we see an alchemist heating a large flask upon a furnace. Within this large flask are eight circular areas or roundels. Seven of these roundels are connected by a chain to a book with seven seals. This is a kind of allusion to the Apocalyptic book of seven seals, and the chains may even carry some association with the idea of the Homeric golden chain that links the spiritual with the earthly, or it may just be used with the sense of linking each process in a roundel with the opening of one of the seven seals.



We have here a sequence of eight roundels. Notice how, the roundel on the top right is different from the others, in that it is not connected to the book of seven seals by a chain. Instead there is a little scroll of parchment saying "prima materia". The other seven form a sequence of stages from the prima materia towards the conclusion of the work. The imagery inside this first roundel differs substantially from that of the other seven, which are based around processes occurring in a flask. Let us just look at this first roundel in more detail.



The text around the circumference states "Spirit, Soul and Body. The green lion and the red lion." We see a naked female and a male figure upon which rays come down from the Moon and Sun above. They stand in front of a basin or well from which a stream of water emerges. A tree grows up from the fountain or well, and a serpent winds itself around the tree trunk. On the left a woman approaches the naked female and is about to kill her with an axe, while on the right a man approaches the naked male figure and is trying to kill him with a spear. A black toad attacks the naked female while a dragon attacks the male. Two birds are seen, one beside the naked female figure the other flying high above the naked male. All the key symbols in the *Ripley Scroll* are seen here. This little roundel can be seen as the key to the whole scroll.

The prime matter is produced by working upon the substance pouring out of the earth using various opposing forces, the red and the green lion, the toad and the dragon, the sun and the moon.

Let us now see how this primal matter is alchemically processed through the remaining seven roundels.



The first roundel in the sequence, like the seven others, shows a flask set upon a furnace. Inside this flask we see the naked male and female figures from the first roundel showing the prima materia. A bird rises up like a soul emerging from these dying figures. They lie upon and earth or ground. In the neck of the flask is an inverted small flask showing that the substance from the prima materia roundel has been poured in. Drops of liquid run down the inside of the flask. Outside this are five monks tending the work. This stage is labelled "Solution".

The text states: The soule forsooth is this sulphur not burning.



Now the temperature has risen, the fire in the furnace is much more intense, and the male and female figures are being consumed by flames within the flask. The flask has an alembic or still head fitted and three essences are being distilled off into three flasks or phials. These essences are shown as the little human figure in a nimbus of light and the bird. These may be the body, soul and spirit extracted from the prima materia. Three monks look on. This is the first of three stages labelled "Black".

The text states: *A calido et humido primo ex illis passie quam debilis sum.* I have at first suffered so much from the hot and humid that I am weak



In this third stage, the second black phase, a monk is seen pouring one of the small flasks of essence extracted in the earlier stage, into the large flask. The intensity of the furnace now seems to have been reduced. Inside this the remains of the male and female figure lie in ashes, while a bird rises up in the flask and another descends upon the material at the bottom of the flask. Here we are reminded of the imagery of the *Crowning of Nature*. Two flasks of essence are left as yet unused, one with the bird, the other with the human figure. These perhaps are the spirit and the soul respectively, with the body already having been poured into the main flask.

The text states: *Et leniter digestus amabile sum ideo exalta in grossioribus*. And I am mildly and pleasantly digested therefore exalted among more gross things.



In the fourth stage, another flask of essence seems to have been poured into the main flask. One monk holds an inverted flask to show us it is empty while another holds a flask containing some essence. Adding the one inverted in the large flask, three small flasks are now being shown here. Two other monks look on, making four in all. This is the third of the black stages.

Inside the main flask the bird ascends and descends, and drops of liquid descend as before. But the human figures are now changed. Previously the male and female figures lay on the bottom of the flask as if dead. Now we see the female aspect seeming to come to life, rising up and becoming reborn in a new form.

The text states: *Exalta sepe e subtilia me ut possim reducere ad simplex*. Elevate and separate me subtly so that I can lead back/reduce to the simple.



In this fifth stage, we may assume the final phial of essence has been poured into the main flask. This stage is now labelled "white". A first solution, then three phases of black, followed by three of white. Five monks now look on three holding flasks. Together with the one inverted in the large flask there are now four small flasks shown.

The text states: *Scicio deficio pota me a albifica*. I am weakened by being divided. Drink me and become white.



This sixth stage, the second white phase, shows the woman standing in the flask of transformation. Six monks now look on. Two operators and four holding flasks. Together with the one inverted in the large flask, five small flasks are now shown.

The text states: *Vidue sumus et a domo proprio elongati ideo nos ipsum reduce ut corpus nos amplectat et amabilia nobis fiat.* We are deprived and distant from our own home, therefore it having reduced us, so that the body embraces us and may become friendly to us.





In the final roundel, the third of the white phases, the woman stands in the flask as before. There is now a crowd of seven monks, six holding flasks and the other perhaps praying or operating the furnace. Together with the one inverted in the large flask there are now seven small flasks shown.

The text states: *Leniter cum igne amicabile fac ut aliqua violentia nos superare non possit.* Heat gently with an amicable fire so that it cannot overcome us by some violence.

So we can see an elaborate alchemical system being demonstrated in quite a subtle way, from the fourth to the seventh stages, through the increasing number of flasks and the number of monks needed to hold them. There are three flasks of essence at the third stage.

#### Stages

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Solution	First Black	Second Black	Third Black	First White	Second White	Third White
		Three Flasks	Three Flasks	Four Flasks	Five Flasks	Seven Flasks
			One Flask full	Two Flasks full	Four Flasks full	Four Flasks full
			One Flask inverted	One Flask inverted		Two Flasks inverted
Five Monks	Three Monks	Three Monks	Four Monks	Five Monks	Six Monks	Seven Monks
Sol	Luna	Sol	Luna	Sol	Luna	Sol

The fourth stage marks a turning point of this little sequence. This is the last of the black stages and from then on the white stages begin.

Another interesting fact is that each of the chains linking the seven roundels to the central book of seven seals has either "sol" or "luna" written upon it.

As an exercise try to find other aspects of symbols that change throughout these seven roundels.

We can see here how so much is hidden in the detail. One of the most important tools you will need to investigate any alchemical sequence is to be able to examine the detail and look for structure. There is so much structure embedded and hidden deeply within this seemingly opaque and obscure work. It may all seem quite straightforward when one has this explained and analysed as we have seen in this lesson, but it requires much thought and contemplation to be able to discover the patterns and structure in seemingly irrelevant detail. There is little extraneous decoration in the allegorical alchemical images

on the scroll. The images are spare and lean, not fattened out with decorative detail, so you should be aware that most symbols and images have been put there as essential elements of the process.

This sequence within the larger sequence of the scroll, appears to be based on a text, sometimes identified as the *Visio Mystica* of Arnold of Villanova (1235 - 1312) or even to Maria the Prophetess. These attributions, however, are no longer accepted and this appears to be an anonymous work originally written at the beginning of the 15th Century. At least 20 manuscripts of this work have survived. The Scroll in Yale has an English version of this text added below the furnace. No other scrolls include this. It is instructive to read this text and see how this relates to the imagery of the roundels. I have somewhat modernised the English to make it easier to read.

An expounding of the signification of the seven seals wherewith the book of philosophy is closed.

I saw an old man shining and rising in brightness having in his hand a book shut and sealed with seven seals. And beholding the book well I perceived the leaves of the book to be of gold; and the cover and clasps were silver, on the top, whereof was placed a speire ring of gold rolled with silver, and in the circumference of the ring was written this subscription: *Spirit: Soul: Body*. From which ring seven sealed chains also of gold as [they were] of silver preceding, did encompass the whole book, and by a respect often pursing the book, did all again return unto the ring.

This old man being demanded by me what this signified, answered saying, "The ring and golden skein coiled with silver is the Philosophers' stone, which in his profundity is gold and the male, and in his manifest silver and the female. And how much [ ] he is divided in his part is always the spirit, but the seven operations which doth encompass the whole magistry of the stone do after make it perfect."

And the old man being again commanded by me what the inscription of the ring did signify, he answered, "The writing is miraculous because it briefly comprehends all the secrets of Philosophy. By the Spirit is understood Mercury which subtly entering into the body disposes it into simplicity, and draws the Soul from it, and elevating it upwards into the air, bears it with him, and afterwards disposes the body and reduces it into the nature of the quintessence which is a certain simplicity, and pours the soul into the body again. The which the body embracing rejoices with it, because the soul when it enters into the body makes it perfect, as the quick perfects the dead, until it rise again and lives [sored], and this is the stone of Philosophy teaching thee to observe all things. The Soul is sulphur not burning because it congeals Mercury into the body of Luna or Sol, meeting it in the place of Nature and is drawn from the body. And the Soul is the mediating between the body and the Spirit which binds and conjoins with an [un...ex... erable] conjunction when as the spirit cannot be united with the body but by the soul, which is the gold and tincture of the philosophers; for know you that without it nothing can be made perfect nor accomplished. And know you also that our sulphur is not common sulphur which is fat and adustive [dry], destroying and corrupting all things. And I say unto thee, body signifies Sol and Luna without life, in which the soul did bear rule and remained, as it were a true form in his subject, which body after the separation of the soul is called a dead body until by introduction by the soul again it be made perfect. And then it is called the immortal body raised from death to life.

Upon the declaration of this [dis...pcone] contained in the king, beholding it better, I saw in the first part of the golden chain written with letters of silver this saying - *a calido et humido primo ex illis sic passus quia debilis sum.*

And hereupon the old man being demanded of me what this writing meant, answered, "This writing makes the first key and operation of the stone which is called putrefaction or digestion of the philosophers' stone which [...] in his due time in a hot and moist fire, for as our nourishment or meat cannot be converted into any other thing but by this digestion, so neither our stone can be converted into a simple unless, by the Spirit, the Soul be drawn from the body, by means of his digestion which is the key of philosophy. For a thing the more it approaches to simplicity the more perfect it is. And know you that unless it be putrefied you cannot attain to this secret."

And looking more vigilantly [...] the vision I saw in the second chain the which was in the beginning silver and in the end gold. And in the silver part thereof was written these words - *Et leviter digestus amabilis su Ideo exalta me agrosioribus.*

Then I requested the old man to expound to me the meaning [...] and said, "Understand that by the seal is understood the second operation of the stone, which is called Distillation. The first part of the silver chain signifies the first thing which is distilled which is the spirit or mercury vive having the life and the white tincture. But the second part which is of gold signifies that which [is ... distilled] secondly and thirdly, and that is tinted oil, the soul and red tincture, which is called the gold of Philosophers, and it is the second key of the secret of philosophy. And in the third seal in the third golden chain was written in [letters] of silver - *Tinctum a tincto* - which he said signifies the separation from air, showing that the air must be exalted in moisture, which is the third key of the work."

And I saw in the fourth seal placed in the fourth chain of silver, written in letters of gold *Exalta sepe e subtilia me ut possu redusi ad simplex*, which he said was the operation of the spirit having life, which is the fourth key of the work. And looking upon the fifth chain which was both of gold and silver, I saw written in the fifth seal in letters of silver this saying - *Siseto, deficio pota me a albifica.*

And the old man said, "this is a great secret which is the dead body calcined, which doth so imbibe and whiten the spirit that they may the sooner be reduced into the most simple nature of the quintessence which is the fifth key of the work."

Likewise beholding the sixth chain which was as well gold as silver, I saw in the sixth seal written with letters of gold this saying - *Vidue sumus et a domo propria elongata ideo nobis ipsum redito ut corporis nos amplectat e amicabile nobis fiat*, this take reduction of the water and oil upon the dead body, when as the soul cannot be nor consists without the body, and the contrary, which is the sixth key of the work. And in the seventh and last chain [as] well gold as silver was the most perfectible and last seal sealing [...] written in letters of gold and silver this saying *Leniter cum igne Amicabile fac ut aliquam violentia nos superare non possset.*

Then said the old man, "this is [...] nourishment and perfection which is to dissolve the fixed and to fixe the dissolved which is the [...] work. "

All these things being finished... I said to the old man, "If [...] you by the Lord of Heaven that of thy courtesy you now open this book unto me, and reveal and show unto me those things which are contained in it."

And the old man answering said, "Amen, I say unto thee that no man is certain to open this book nor to open the seven seals thereof, but a lamb, that is to say, the mild disciple of philosophers to whom God shall give power to effect and reveal this secret which I have told thee, therefore understand and do as you have seen and the book shall be opened unto thee. For men labour but God gives the increase unto all things. Then blessed be God that gives wisdom unto the wise. Amen."

The texts on the roundels differs a little in the different scrolls, and from that given in this *Visio* translation. I have used the version from the Cambridge manuscript for my translations added to the roundels descriptions.

As an exercise you should try and see just how the text of the *Visio mystica* provides the structure to the imagery of the roundels. There are a few other small details indicated in this text. Try and correlate these with the symbolism of the roundels.

The verses associated with the first panel echo the symbolism in the roundels. We should note, however, that these particular verses are not unique and quotes in part an early English alchemical poem *The Work of Richard Carpenter*. This is supposed to have been written in the middle of the 15th century, and probably before the *Ripley Scroll*. So the Scroll again (as it did with the *Visio Mystica*) reuses or quotes from earlier material.

### Scroll - first panel

Of the Sun take the light  
The red gum that is so bright  
And of the Moon do also  
The white gum there both two  
The philosophers' Sulphur wise  
This I call without strife  
Kibrit and Kibrigh it is called also  
And other names many more  
Of them draw out a tincture  
And make of them a marriage pure  
Between the husband and the wife  
Espoused with the water of life  
But of this water thou must beware  
Or else thy work will be full bare  
He must be made of his own kind  
Mark thou well now in thy mind  
Acetum of the philosophers men call this  
A water abiding so it is  
The maiden's milk of the dew  
That all our work do renew  
The spirit of life it is called also  
And other names many more  
The which causes our generation  
Between the man and the woman  
So look that there no division  
Be there in the conjunction  
Of the Moon and of the Sun  
After the marriage is begun  
And all the while they be a wedding  
Give to them their drinking  
Acetum that is good and fine  
Better to them than any wine  
Now when this marriage is done  
Philosophers call this a stone  
The which hath a great nature  
To bring a stone that is so pure  
So he have kindly nourishing  
Perfect heat and decoction  
But in the matrix where they be put  
Let never the vessel be unshut  
Till they have engendered a stone  
In all the world there is not such a one

### Richard Carpenter - alchemical poem

Of Titan Magnesia take the clear light,  
The red gum that is so bright,  
Of philosophers the Sulfur wise,  
I am called Gold without strife:  
Of him draw out a Tincture,  
And make a matrimony pure:  
Between the husband and the wife,  
Espoused with the Water of life:  
And so that no division  
Be there, in the conjunction  
Of the Moon and of the Sun,  
After the marriage is begun;  
And that Mercury the planet,  
In loes make him so to mete:  
That either with other be joined even,  
As a Stone engendered sent down from heaven;  
Of him make water clear running,  
As any crystal bright shining.  
Drawn out of bodies fixed,  
By Nature prively mixed  
Within a vessel depured clean,  
Of Philosophers bright and shiney;  
Beware the fume escape you nought,  
And also mark well in thy thought;  
That of the Fire the quality,  
Equal to Phoebus' beams be;  
In the month of June and July,  
Understand me be not dull;  
For you shall see marvels great,  
Colours spring out of the heat:  
First Black and White, and so Red,  
And after Citrine without dread:  
And so within hours three,  
That Stone shall through pierced be  
With Air that shall upon him light,  
The which is a wonderous sight:  
When the spirit is refrained,  
And with the body so constrained,  
That him asunder may nothing part,  
So Nature them doth there so coart,  
In matrix when they both be knit,  
Let never thy Vessel be unshut;  
Till this ingendred have a stone,  
That in this world is not such a one.

['coart' means pressed together.]

The verses on the Scroll seem to refer to this process in the roundels. It opens by asking the alchemist to take the Sun and the Moon, the red and the white gum, and draw out of this Philosophical Kibrit or Sulphur a tincture. This seems to be what is taking place in the third roundel. Then he must make a marriage in the flask between these two which should be espoused or completed by adding the water of life. The verses make it clear that this water is very important. It is the acetum of the philosophers, the maiden's milk of the dew, or the spirit of life. This appears to be the water drawn off in the stage pictured in the third roundel. If the alchemist adds the right water to his flask, then the male and female in the flask will be united together and married. As this is further nourished by the water it turns into a stone. Care must be taken by the alchemist never to let his vessel remain open, and that it has the correct heat and cooking. If he is diligent in all these things then he will have made the perfect stone.

For a final exercise you should try and find the links between the Ripley and the Carpenter verses. We will return to the Richard Carpenter poem again as other sections of text quote lines from it. Carpenter is supposed by Ashmole to have been the brother of John Carpenter the Bishop of Worcester between 1443 and 1476. These verses seem to date from the mid 15th century, and thus predate the Scroll.