



ALCHEMY

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A Brief History of Alchemy

Alchemy was born in ancient Egypt, where the word Khem was used in reference to the fertility of the flood plains around the Nile. Egyptian beliefs in life after death, and the mummification procedures they developed, probably gave rise to rudimentary chemical knowledge and a goal of immortality.



By 332 BC, Alexander the Great had conquered Egypt. Greek philosophers became interested in the Egyptian ways. Greek views of how matter is made up of the four elements of nature - Fire, Earth, Air and Water, were merged with the Egyptian sacred science. The result was Khemia, the Greek word for Egypt.

When Egypt was occupied by the Arabs in the 7th Century, they added 'al-' to the word Khemia and al-Khemia meaning 'the Black Land' is now seen as a possible origin for the word alchemy. The Greek word khumos, meaning 'fluid' has been suggested as an alternate origin for the word alchemy, there is as yet no consensus on the matter. It is unfortunate that more is not known about this early period in the history of alchemy. In 391, invading Christians burned the great library in Alexandria, destroying many relevant works.



Alchemy was also developed independently in China by Taoist monks.

The monks pursued both the outer elixir and the inner elixir. The former being minerals, plants etc. which could prolong life, and the latter being the use of exercise techniques, such as Qigong, to manipulate the chi or life force of the body.


Like China and Egypt, India developed alchemy independently. They had beliefs similar to the Chinese, in that they used external and internal methods to purify the body and prolong life.

In their work the Indians invented steel and long before Bunsen and Kirchhoff's work, realised the importance of flame colour in the identification of metals.



The introduction of alchemy to the west came in the 8th Century when the Arabs brought it to Spain. From here it quickly spread to the rest of Europe.

The Arabian belief was that metals are made up of mercury and sulfur in varying proportions. Gold was seen as the perfect metal and all others were less perfect, an idea popular among



western alchemists. It was a very popular idea indeed, that these lower metals could be transmuted into gold by means of a substance known as the Philosophers Stone.

The Stone is also believed to be able to confer immortality, the Chinese name for it being the Pill of Immortality.

In Europe, alchemy led to the discovery of manufacture of amalgams and advances in many other chemical processes and the apparatus required for them. Eventually, by the 16th Century, the alchemists in Europe had separated into two groups.

The first group focussed on the discovery of new compounds and their reactions - leading to what is now the science of chemistry.

The second continued to look at the more spiritual, metaphysical side of alchemy, continuing the search for immortality and the transmutation of base metals into gold.

This led to the modern day idea of alchemy.