

An Alchemical Medal and its Iconographic Sources in Printed Books

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Alchemical medals and coins are part of a category of artifacts that were made of precious metals obtained by the alleged transmutation of base metals, often to commemorate this supposed success. Mostly, they used alchemical symbolism but in some cases they also bore an inscription referring to the alleged transformation of metals. Vladimír Karpenko divided alchemical metals and coins into four categories:

- I. Coins and medals made from a precious metal allegedly produced by the alchemical transmutation of base metals.
- II. Coins and medals that were not made from alchemical metal but have been regarded as alchemical due to a misunderstanding of the symbols minted on them, or based on legend.
- III. Coins and medals made from various metals, mostly non-precious, that were used as amulets or talismans.
- IV. Copies of alleged alchemical coins and medals made from non-precious metals.¹

The medal described here falls into the second category (Figs. 1 and 2). Its inscriptions and symbolism relate to the goal of alchemy, i.e. the Philosophers' Stone as a transmutation agent and universal medicine. The inscriptions do not refer to successful transmutation but serve as a reminder of the importance of divine favor for the successful outcome of laboratory work, i.e. for the ›magisterium‹.²

The production of alchemical medals was popular in the 17th and first half of the 18th century. This period was characterized by reports of several spectacular transmutations. Among them was the one performed by Johann Konrad von Richthausen at Prague Castle in 1648 in the presence

1 Karpenko 2001, p. 55; Karpenko 2007, p. 125.

2 Abraham 1998, p. 121.

Fig. 1
Alchemical medal, obverse,
16th/17th c., gold, coined.
Nuremberg, GNM, inv. no. Med5830.

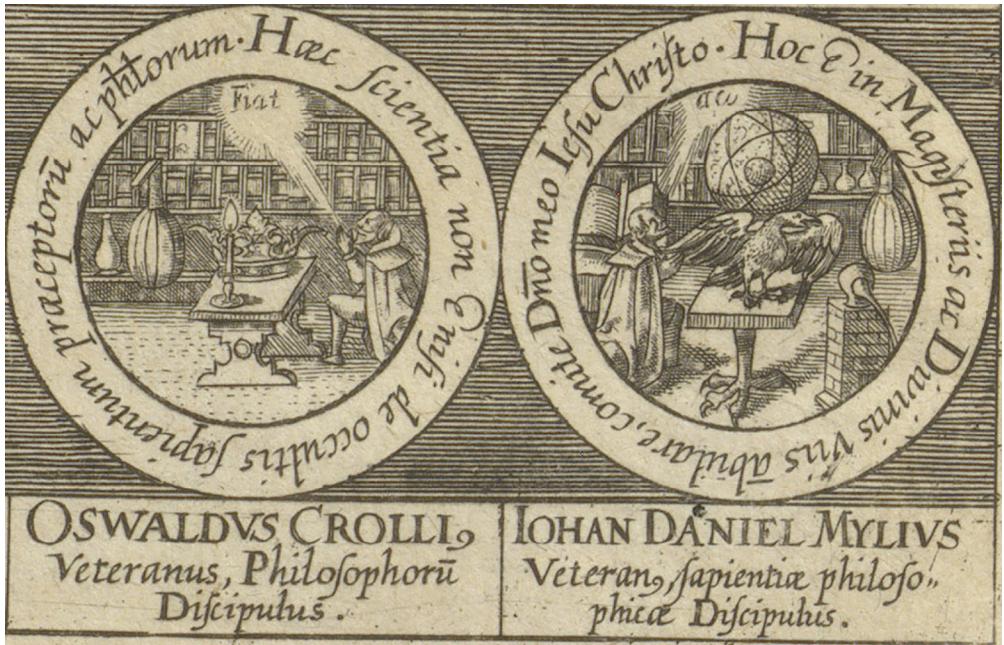




Fig. 2
Alchemical medal, reverse
16th/17th c., gold, coined.
Nuremberg, GNM, inv. no. Med583o.



< **Fig. 3**
'Seals of the Philosophers' with
Oswald Croll and Johann Daniel
Mylius (detail), in: Johann
Daniel Mylius, *Opus medico-
chymicum*, Frankfurt a.M. 1618/20,
Vol. 3, pl. 10.
Frankfurt a. M., UB, Sign. Occ. 1150, Bd. 3.

> **Fig. 4**
'Seals of the Philosophers' with
Mary the Jewess (detail),
in: Johann Daniel Mylius,
Opus medico-chymicum,
Frankfurt a.M. 1618/20, Vol. 3, pl. 1.
Frankfurt a.M., UB, Sign. Occ. 1150, Bd. 3.

of Emperor Ferdinand III (1608-1657).³ The emperor had ordered to mint a medal from the gold produced, which is known only from a depiction.⁴ Of the surviving medals, the most famous one is most likely the medalion for Emperor Leopold I (1640-1705) which was created by Wenzel Seiler of Reinburg in 1677 (Fig. 6). It was claimed that two-thirds of the medal were made of silver which had seemingly changed into gold. Chemical analysis proved that this object weighing 7200 grams was in fact made from an alloy of gold, silver and copper.⁵

The obverse of the gold medal from the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* depicts an alchemist kneeling and praying in his laboratory. His eyes are focused on the glowing cloud with the word *FLAT* from which a stream of rays emerges towards him. On the opposite side of the laboratory, there is a brick furnace with a water bath in which a distillation apparatus is placed. The distillate is collected into a flask standing next to the furnace. In between the furnace and the alchemist there is a six-pointed star with intertwined arms, inside which another smaller six-pointed star can be discerned. It stands for the Philosophers' Stone and is created by combining the symbols of the elements water and fire or of the sun and the moon.⁶ The central perspective of the room is created by the lines of the paving. Shelves with several bottles, vials, and cucurbits are lined up along the walls of the laboratory. The inscription on the obverse reads *ACQUIRITUR PRECIBUS AD DEUM MAGISTERIUM* (A rare magisterium is obtained from God).

The medal's reverse shows two triangular crucibles turned against each other and connected by two streams of vapors which extend both from bottom to top and from top to bottom. Between these two streams, a plant with five flowers grows on a small hill behind the lower crucible. The symbols of the sun and the moon are placed next to the upper crucible. The inscription on the reverse reads *NON A ME SED EX DEI OMNIPOTENTIS GRATIA* (Not from me, but thanks to God's almighty grace).

The use of various iconographic sources allows for a relatively accurate dating of the post quem medal. The so-called *Seals of Philosophers* from Johann Daniel Mylius's *Opus medico-chymicum* (Frankfurt, 1618/20) were used as templates. The obverse of the medal is modeled after the last two seals pictured on sheet ten. They are dedicated to Oswald Croll and

3 Frenschkowski 2005, pp. 397-402; Bauer 1883, pp. 35-37; Müller-Jahncke/Telle 1986, pp. 243-244; Karpenko 2001, pp. 55-56; Karpenko 2007, pp. 126-129.

4 Becher 1689, p. 24.

5 КНМ Vienna, No. I 21758; Strebinger/Reif 1932, pp. 199-213; Müller-Jahncke/Telle 1986, pp. 251-252; Karpenko 2001, pp. 56-57; Karpenko 2007, pp. 131-133.

6 Abraham 1998, pp. 19 of.

Johann Daniel Mylius (**Fig. 3**).⁷ The motif of the kneeling alchemist to whom the divine enlightenment descends in the shape of the word *FLAT* is taken from the first of these seals, while the distillation furnace and the shelves featuring several vessels and books are modeled after the second seal. Both seals were inspired by the title page of Croll's work *Basilica chymica* (1609) created by the engraver Aegidius II Sadeler (1570-1629) who was in the service of Emperor Rudolf II (1552-1612).⁸ The motif of the lute, an important reference to the contemporary interpretation of alchemy as the »art of music«⁹ (which is missing on the medal), was also adopted from this title page. The double hexagram on the medal symbolizing the Philosophers' Stone also features prominently in the engraving¹⁰, yet it was probably taken from other seals in Mylius's *Opus medico-chymicum* where it appears several times.

One of Mylius's seals on sheet one (**Fig. 4**) served as a model for the medal's reverse. It is dedicated to the legendary Mary the Jewess. Several technological discoveries have been attributed to her such as the *kerotakis* or the water bath for distillation named after her: *Balneum Mariae*.¹¹ The creator of the medal supplemented this pattern with symbols of the sun and the moon. Mylius's seal is accompanied by an inscription which is important for understanding its symbolism: *Fumus complectitur Fumum et herba in montibus capit utrumque* (Vapor embraces the vapor and the herb receives both). The motif of this seal, including the inscription, was taken from Michael Maier's *Symbola aureae mensae duodecim nationum* (Frankfurt 1617) in which it accompanied a depiction of Mary the Jewess (**Fig. 5**).¹² Instead of a crucible, two vessels resembling craters are shown here which Maier comments on as *Hermes's vessels*.¹³ It must be added that the images from Maier's *Symbola* were taken over into Daniel Stolcius's emblematic work *Viridarium chymicum* (Frankfurt 1624), while Mylius's seals were incorporated into another work by Stolcius, the *Hortulus hermeticus flosculus philosophorum* (Frankfurt 1627).

Although the symbolism of both sides of the medal seems to be quite different, they are connected by the fact that celestial influence played an important role in alchemical works. On the obverse, God's grace which the alchemist must receive in order to understand the principles of

7 Khan 2021.

8 Purš 2015a, p. 66. ► p. 138, Fig. 12.

9 Cf. Meinel 1986, pp. 201-227.

10 Purš 2015a, pp. 71-74.

11 Schütt 2000, pp. 117-122; Hild 1998, pp. 235-236.

12 Maier 1617c, p. 57. Maier's inscription says *herba alba*, meaning »white herb«.

13 Idem, p. 63.

Fig. 5
Mary the Jewess, in: Michael
 Maier, *Symbola aureae*
mensae duodecim nationum,
 Frankfurt a.M. 1617, p. 57.
 Munich, BSB, Sign. Res/4 Alch. 51.



alchemical theory and practice, and to be able to realize the Great Work, i.e. to produce the Philosophers' Stone, is presented as a necessity. The necessity of divine revelation had been associated with alchemy since its beginnings and in the Middle Ages this was often referred to as *Donum dei*, God's gift.¹⁴ The alchemist had to pray to God exactly as depicted on the medal's obverse where the revelation of divine light is complemented by the eloquent word *FIAT*, a reference to the initial words of Genesis. The accompanying inscription clearly confirms this interpretation of symbolism which is underlined by the central perspective used. This is clearly a reference to one of the most famous depictions of the alchemical laboratory / oratory in Heinrich Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* (1595, 1609).¹⁵

The medal's reverse indicates that just as the alchemist must accept the influence descending from heaven, the processed material itself must be subjected to it, too. According to the *Dialogue of Mary [the Jewess] and Aron*, it is necessary to combine the white herb with two fumes which contain two lights,¹⁶ i.e. the Sun and the Moon. This is exactly what the medal's creator added. Both fumes refer to the two alchemical principles of metals, sulfur

14 Karpenko 1998, pp. 63-80; Karpenko 2001, pp. 59-60; Karpenko 2007, pp. 144-146.

15 Cf. Forshaw 2006, pp. 199-201; Forshaw 2010, pp. 170-176; Purš 2015b, pp. 50-89.
 ► Forshaw, p. 237-246.

16 *Theatri chemici Volumen sextum*, Straßburg 1661, p. 479.



Fig. 6
Alchemical medallion, 1677,
gold, cast, d: 374-301 mm.
Vienna, KHM, inv. no. MK 27b β .

and mercury,¹⁷ which, in accordance with the ancient belief in the relationship between celestial bodies and metals, have their terrestrial and celestial hypostases, as expressed in the words of the *Emerald Tablet* attributed to Hermes Trismegistus.¹⁸ As the inscription on the reverse states, the proper conduct of the operation depends on God's grace.

We see another remarkable connection between the medal's obverse and reverse. While the obverse refers to the practice of distillation, the crucibles depicted on the reverse refer to the processes carried out by using metallurgical and assaying methods. The assayers tested metals by two basic methods: the ›wet‹ method, i.e. dissolution in mineral acids, and the ›dry‹ method, which took advantage of a range of metallurgical techniques such as cupellation.¹⁹ Alchemists had adopted this symbolism claiming that the Philosophers' Stone could be made in either the ›wet‹

17 To the so-called Mercury-Sulphur theory see Ganzenmüller 1938, pp. 141-144; Newman 1998, pp. 288-290.

18 *Quod est inferius, est sicut (id) quod est superius, et quod est superius, est sicut (id) quod est inferius, ad perpetranda miracula rei Unius.* See Ruska 1926, p. 2.

19 Cf. Halleaux 1986, pp. 277-291.

or the ›dry‹ way,²⁰ with the former being long and the latter short. Without a doubt, alchemists combined their laboratory procedures in various ways. The division into two ›ways‹ often applied only to the final phase of the Great Work which was to be carried out either in a crucible with high temperatures or in a glass vessel under long-term heating in an athanor. The alchemical iconography was related especially to the ›wet‹ way because when using it, the alchemist could observe many awe-inspiring phenomena.

20 Principe 2013, p. 161.