

Adam McLean's Study Course on the Ripley Scroll

Lesson 1 : Introduction - Placing the scroll in context

The *Ripley Scroll* is one of the most remarkable artefacts of alchemical symbolism. Apart from anything else it must be the largest of all symbolic alchemical drawings - the version in Cambridge is 6.71 metres long by 57 centimetres across (22 ft by 22 inches). The scroll has not yet been thoroughly studied by scholars, though a few articles are now appearing about this remarkable document. The scroll was virtually unknown till Carl Jung used sections of some scrolls as illustrations to his *Psychology and Alchemy*, 1944. A number of more recent works have mentioned the scroll or tried in some way to understand its symbolism. I have added some references as an appendix to this lesson.

I have found that we can only truly read an alchemical work when we place it into its correct historical context, otherwise we merely interpret and project the preconceptions and concerns of a later age onto the work itself, and thus view it through a distorting lens. We must always try to see how the scroll was conceived within the cultural milieu of the original author. So first we should look at what little history is attached to the scrolls.

At the moment there are 21 surviving manuscript copies of the *Ripley Scroll*. Actually that is not quite right as we must immediately recognise that there are two distinct versions of *Ripley Scroll*, Type I with 16 examples and Type II with 5 examples. In this study course we will focus almost entirely on the Type I scroll. The Type I scrolls are all very similar using the same images and text with a number of variations and additions in some cases. The Type II are a more varied group and though some incorporate elements from the Type I scrolls, they will, even on a superficial examination, be seen as differing in structure. I will include a note on the Type II scrolls in a later lesson, but for now we will only be concerned with the Type I. So when I refer to the scroll in these lessons I specifically mean the Type I group. See appendix for a listing of the manuscripts.

The scrolls were produced over a period of around a hundred years, some being copied almost exactly from earlier versions and others being a radical redrawing of the images. Thus the British library Ms. Add. 5025 (2) and MS. Add. 5025 (4) are about one half to one third the size of the other copies. Some of the scrolls are on parchment others on paper. Some are well coloured, others have badly faded, and some are uncoloured. Some are well drawn by a reasonably competent artist or copyist, others are more crudely executed.

Dating is a problem, as it often is with alchemical manuscripts, and it is best to be

conservative with assigning dates as manuscripts may appear older than they actually are. It seems likely that the earliest ones were produced in the early decades of the 16th century, with the later copies being made towards the end of the 16th into the beginning of the 17th century. There is a problem with dating the copy considered to be the earliest, Bodley Roll 1 in Oxford. The Bodleian catalogue description assigns this on the grounds of the style of the written characters to the middle of the 15th century. It is rather uncertain if this date can be sustained, and it may be that we have to come to accept that this, like the other early versions, is consistent with being made in the opening decades of the 1500's. We cannot view Bodley Roll 1 as the original version, because it has a key section of text missing.

Of the sonn take thy lyht
 The rede gome yt ys so bryht
 And of ye mone do all so
 The wyht gome there boye to
 The felissovyr sulfer wyss
 This I caled wt outtyn strife
 Kybryt and akybr I callid also
 Mand other nayd many moo
 Of them draw howt a tyntor

And

The copyist making this scroll left a space for the rest of the text and a placemaker with the word "And" but neglected later to add the text. So there will have been an earlier copy, either the original or a copy of the original from which he was working. This original copy has not survived.

The next earliest copy would appear to be the Cambridge manuscript Fitzwilliam 276. This has been made on paper rather than the parchment of Bodley Roll 1 and the paper can be dated through the watermark.

So without going into too much detail on the dating we can immediately see that we should take a conservative view and place the copying of the scroll to the early decades of the 16th century. As George Ripley died in 1490 none of the existing copies would have been made by him. Indeed, we may even have to raise the question, of whether the scroll was actually conceived by George Ripley, or ascribed to him at a later date. The earliest versions do not mention Ripley's name, though some later copies do.

Let us try and place the scroll into a time line of other key works of alchemical symbolism.

- c. 1410 *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*
- c. 1420 *Aurora consurgens*
- c. 1450 *Pretiossissimun Donum Dei* [many scores of manuscripts from the 15th to the 18th century]
- c. 1520 *The Ripley Scroll***
- 1532-5 *Splendor Solis*
- 1546 Printed woodcuts of *Petrus Bonus* series [there may be earlier manuscripts]
- 1550 Printed version of the *Rosarium philosophorum*
- 1570-80 Earliest versions of the *Crowning of Nature*

Was the Ripley scroll a visible influence on the early alchemical tradition? It seems not. I don't know of any work of the late 15th or 16th centuries which mentions the scroll. Unlike the *Donum Dei* which appeared in so many copies and was printed in numerous versions, or the 'Book of the Holy Trinity' which was made widely available through being printed in Reusner's *Pandora* of 1582, or the *Splendor solis* which was also printed with woodcut images at the close of the 16th century, the *Ripley Scroll* images were not printed till much later in 1718, in David Beuther's *Universal und Particularia*. So the only way people could be influenced by the scroll was if they actually were able to see a copy. All the copies of the scroll seem to have remained in Britain, though key personalities in the late 16th century such as John Dee and Simon Forman had access to copies and must therefore have passed this information on to others. However, there seems no evidence that the Scroll had any impact upon early continental alchemy. The text was printed in 1652 in Elias Ashmole's *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, at the time when there was a revival of interest in Ripley, perhaps sparked off by Ashmole and also the publication in Latin of Ripley's works at Kassel in 1649.

Although we should perhaps not see the Scroll as a major influence on later alchemical imagery and writings, nevertheless it remains one of the most intricate and well conceived examples of early alchemical symbolism. Many of the key symbolic elements in alchemy are found depicted there, and the whole work is obviously conceived as a kind of alchemical sequence in which the alchemical work is illustrated through a series of tableau. We can immediately recognise four separate panels which seem to be demarcated one from the other, as though they are stages or different views of the ongoing alchemical process. A fifth panel does not seem to bear such obvious alchemical symbols, and we will look at the possible significance of this later.

- First panel The alchemist places a pelican flask onto his furnace.
- Second panel Two basins one heptangular, the other quadrangular are set around a central pillar.
- Third panel The bird of Hermes eats its wings
- Fourth panel The dragon bites at the moon
- Fifth panel A man in medieval clothes holds a strange staff. In some manuscripts a king also appears.

Ripley was well known in the alchemical tradition from the late 16th century onward through his idea of the twelve gates of alchemy. This was published in English in 1591 with many Latin editions following on, and it was included in the important compendium the *Theatrum Chemicum*, 1602. The idea of the twelve gates of alchemical processes which lead into the alchemical castle, seemed to catch the interest of many alchemists and Ripley was often quoted by 17th century alchemical authors. This idea of the twelve gates does not seem to find any embodiment in the symbolism of the Scroll, there being no obvious twelvefold structure. Instead the Scroll seems to use only the sevenfold, the fourfold, the triple and the dual in its symbolism. You can read the text of the Twelve Gates on the alchemy web site at <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/ripgates.html>

Apart from the panels of imagery the Scroll also bears a number of verses. There are five main verses one for each panel, except the third panel which has two verses upon it. Some versions of the Scroll have additional verses at the end. The verses seem directly linked with the imagery, often commenting on and extending the imagery. The verses are quite consistent through the various versions though the English spelling differs so much between the different manuscripts, and often words have become altered through copying errors. We will examine the text of these verses in a later lesson.

I include with this lesson the **Ripley.exe** file, which contains my own coloured version of the Ripley scroll. This is primarily based on the Bodley Rolls 1, the Cambridge, and the Yale versions. The colouring to a great extent follows what can be seen on the manuscripts, but I have had to improvise and adjust things in some areas. I am not presenting this as a corrected scroll, but merely as an integration of some of the early versions. As an exercise for this first lesson you should thoroughly examine the scroll, and familiarise yourself with all its symbolism. Another interesting practical exercise is to make a listing of all the symbols depicted on each panel or tableau, with any duals, triplicities, or quaternaries of symbols, in the manner we explored in my foundation course on alchemical symbolism. There is no background or decorative elements here. Every image depicted is an active symbol. The next lesson will deal with the symbolism on each of the four sections, so try to familiarise yourself with the details of the scroll.

Appendix

Type I Scrolls

Bodley Roll 1	Early 16th cent.
Cambridge	first half 16th cent.
Huntington	second 16th cent.
Yale	c. 1570
Princeton	end 16th cent.
Ashmole Roll 52	end 16th cent.
B.L. Add. 32621	end 16th cent.
Edinburgh	16th cent.
B.L. Add 5025/2	16th cent.
B.L. Add 5025/4	16th cent.
B.L. Sloane 2523 B	16th cent.
Getty	16th cent.
Ashmole Roll 40	c. 1600
Wellcome 692	begin 17th cent.
Wellcome 693	begin 17th cent.
Sotheby sale	1624

Type II Scrolls

B.L. Add 5025-1	16th cent.
B.L. Add 5025-3	16th cent.
B.L. Sloane 2424A	16th cent.
Ashmole Rolls 53	17th cent.
Ashmole Rolls 54	17th cent.

Some books and articles which treat of the Ripley Scroll.

Jung, C.G. *Psychology and Alchemy*.

Burland, Cottie. *The arts of the alchemists*, 1967.

Dobbs, Betty Jo Teeter. Alchemical Death and Resurrection [Has coloured illustration of the Huntington scroll.]

McCallum, R.I. 'The Ripley Scroll of the Royal college of Physicians of Edinburgh' in the journal *Vesalius*, II, 1, 39-49, 1996.

Linden, Stanton J. 'Reading the Ripley Scrolls: Iconographic Patterns in Renaissance Alchemy' in the conference proceedings *European iconography East and West*, 1993.

Linden, Stanton J. 'The Ripley Scrolls and the Compound of Alchymy' in *Glasgow Emblem Studies Volume 3 Emblems and alchemy*, 1998.