

# Adam McLean's Study Course on the Ripley Scroll

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## Lesson 7 : Ripley's signature

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We have now looked at the *Ripley Scroll* in some detail and been able to identify all of its symbolic elements. We have seen how these are related together to form sub-sequences which reflect alchemical processes (such as the sequence of colour changes) found in other alchemical manuscripts and in allegorical alchemical texts and verses. Thus it has been possible to show that the *Scroll*, which seemed at the outset entirely unique and obscure, can be quite easily explored within the context of the tradition of alchemical symbolism and emblematic sequences. The work reveals itself once we come to see it in the context of alchemical imagery and not seek ad hoc explanations drawing on ideas which have no connection to the work itself. We must always remember that the author of this *Scroll* was deeply immersed in the alchemical tradition, he had undoubtedly read other allegorical works and pondered other alchemical manuscripts. He was familiar with the symbolic language of alchemy and thus his work can really only be understood within the context of alchemical symbolism. This is what has been attempted in this study course. I hope a firm foundation has been built upon which further insights can be constructed.

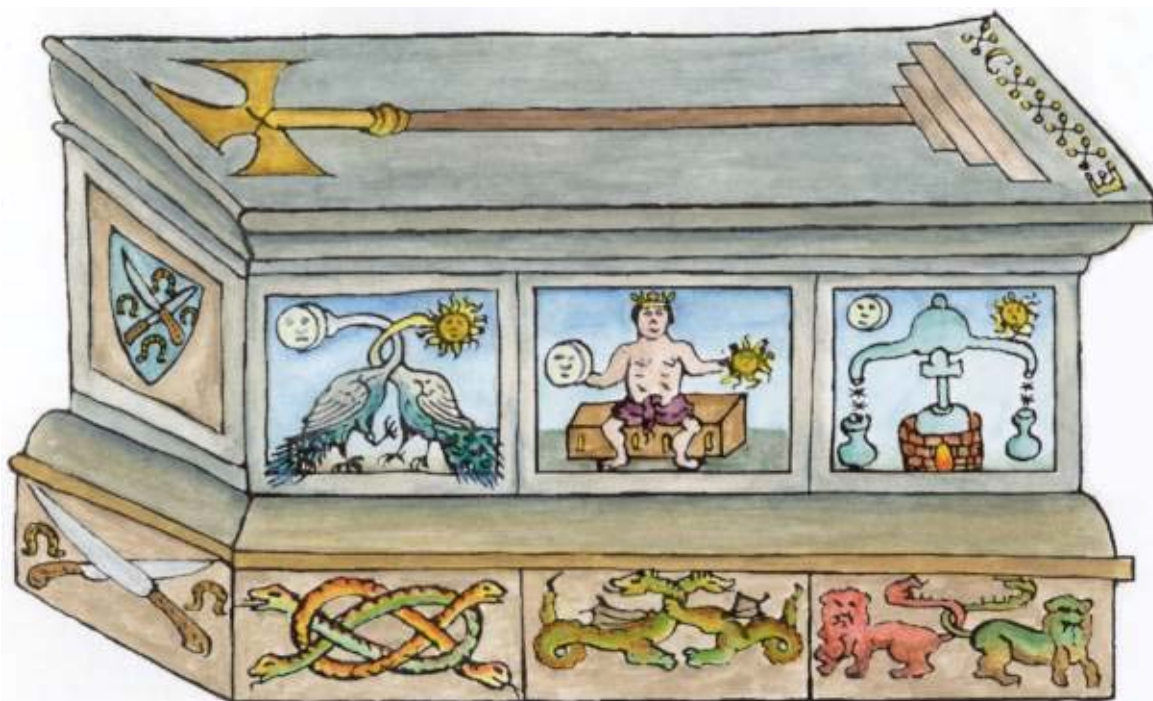
We have in these lessons shied away from positively identifying George Ripley, the Canon of Bridlington, as the actual author of the *Scroll*. In a sense it does not actually matter whether he was the author as it is the material that is presented in the *Scroll* that is important, however, since beginning this course I have been able to obtain access to a drawing made by Elias Ashmole in his annotated copy of his *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. This copy, annotated by Ashmole himself, contains a few corrections, amendments and some new material he had discovered since his book had been published. Among these is a drawing of George Ripley's tomb. The original drawing which Ashmole copied from is now in the British Library in MS Cotton Vitellius E.X. fol 234v, but this has been damaged by fire and part of the image is now missing. Ashmole writes beneath his own drawing

The draught of George Ryplies Monument at Bridlington inYorkshire : taken  
from a draught in a MS in Bibliotheca Cotton [Vitellius ] E.10 18 Nov: 1671 by  
E. A.

Here is my own redrawn and corrected copy of Ashmole's pen drawing. I have taken the liberty of colouring the images. The images on the front panels of the tomb are all familiar alchemical ones. They all show the working of the polarities of the Sun and Moon. Sun and moon-headed birds entwine their necks, the king holds solar and lunar discs, while in the rightmost panel we see an alembic fitted to a flask set in a furnace, distilling out two essences, one solar, the other lunar. In the lower three panels, we again see symbolic expressions of the alchemical idea of the union of polarities - the two intertwined double-headed snakes, two

dragons interweaving their necks and two lions. Of these symbols only the two lions are key symbolic components of the *Scroll*. The two dragons might be eating their own wings, which would echo the third panel of the *Scroll*, but the drawing of the tomb is not detailed enough to be entirely sure on these points. It is suggestive but not conclusive evidence of a link. The top of the tomb has the cross on the three steps - a conventional Christian image of the time. On the left is the date 1490, the year in which Ripley died.

The panel at the head of the tomb, drawn in reverse perspective in order to create a bit more room for the images, is a shield quartered by two crossed knives with horseshoes in each quarter. This image is repeated in the lower panel with the two crossed knives and two horseshoes. These symbols are not recognisably alchemical, so perhaps we should view these as having some personal connection to Ripley, rather than reflecting his alchemical interests. It may be best to view this as a heraldic image rather than an alchemical one. I have not been able to discover the coat of arms of the Ripley family during the 15th century. The present day Ripley family coat of arms is entirely different and there are no knives or horseshoes there (nor any alchemical resonances!).



The horseshoes are, however, significant in the context of the *Scroll*. You will remember, the figure of the clerk at the bottom of the *Scroll*. This figure carries a staff with a quiver of pens and a roll of parchment. A horseshoe was attached to the other end of his staff. The significance of this horseshoe now becomes clear. I cannot think of any alchemical manuscript or printed emblem which uses the horseshoe as a symbol. So we must presume this horseshoe to be a personal symbol of George Ripley, perhaps used in his coat of arms or as part of a personal seal.

It appears that Ripley's father came from Ripley in Derbyshire. This area was under the control of Darley Abbey, an Augustinian Priory founded by Robert Ferrers. The name Ferrers being derived from "farrier", that is, a smith who makes horseshoes, and the horseshoe appears on

the arms of the Priory. The horseshoe symbol is still used in the town of Ripley. Ripley's father built Ripley Castle about 80 miles north in Yorkshire. Later George Ripley became a Canon at the Augustinian Priory in Bridlington, also in Yorkshire. As Bridlington does not seem to have any association with the horseshoe symbol, we can presume this is connected rather with Ripley's origins, so it may be a symbol with which he felt a personal connection. Thus we might expect it to have appeared in his family's crest or on some personal seal.

So our initial conservative view that the *Scroll*, as it lacks any direct reference to Ripley, might not have actually been created by Ripley, should be revised in the light of this connection. In a sense the *Scroll* bears the signature of Ripley in the horseshoe. So I am pleased to announce as a conclusion to this course that we have over the past six months truly been exploring and studying the *Ripley Scroll*.

