



# Adam McLean's Study Course on Inner alchemy and alchemical symbolism

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## Lesson Ten : Animals in the emblem space.

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Among the most obvious symbols used in alchemy are animals. This should not be surprising as animals are a familiar aspect of people's lives and also play an important part in mythology. Animals are found in much art, religious iconography, literature and folk tales, and are a definite component of the culture out of which alchemical symbolism emerged.

We must, however, be cautioned against interpreting the animal forms in alchemical emblems by referring them to other appearances of animal symbols outside of alchemy. With a few exceptions, animal forms in alchemical emblems have a specific alchemical context and it will be found to be counterproductive to merely project interpretations of animals symbols from examples and subjects outside alchemy.

So let us look in a general way at the manner in which animals appear in alchemical emblems. We have already examined the symbol of the bird - and found that one component of this symbol in alchemy lies in its flying up and down, circulating between the lower and the higher. We have postponed looking at the specific bird symbols till later. Some of these specify birds, raven-crow, swan, peacock, etc., refer to stages of the alchemical process which we will examine in more detail in a later lesson.

Putting aside the birds for now, we can make a provisional list of some animals which appear in alchemical emblems. I have only listed a few here. Those people with access to a wide range of emblematic material should try and make the listing more comprehensive.

Lion  
Dragon  
Snake  
Salamander  
Toad  
Wolf/Dog  
Fish  
Dolphin  
Unicorn  
Stag  
Hare  
Crab or lobster

These are roughly in order of most frequent appearance.

The lion is the most common animal symbol and its appearance in alchemical emblems is quite complex. We will devote an entire lesson to the lion symbol later in the course. The dragon is another common though complex symbol and we will also examine this in detail later.

In this lesson we should try and focus on the ways in which these animal symbols appear in alchemical emblems. Birds, of course, when used in the context of volatility and circulating between the above and the below, are found in the air and usually the upper part of the emblem. But we will see that when used with the different idea of processes they are more often seen striding or standing on the ground. We note something similar with the other animal symbols. Some animals are usually depicted standing on the middle ground or space of the emblem, while others seem to occupy more subterranean or lower positions in the emblem space, and others are naturally found in water.

Thus in the *Book of Lambspring* the stag and the unicorn meet in the middle space of the emblem.



Whereas the dragon often appears emerging from a cave or some lower part of the emblem space. As with the frontispiece from Mylius' *Philosophia reformata*.



We can see here that the Sun King sits upon a lion while below, from inside a cave, a dragon sends forth its fiery breath. This is echoed on the other side of the emblem by the Lunar Queen riding on a dolphin while below her is a bird. As we have discovered earlier in the course, the underlying geometry of the emblem space is important. The way in which we read a symbol often depends on its placement within the space of the emblem.

Lions usually stand in the middle ground of the emblem, while dragons and their related symbols - snakes, salamanders, lizards and toads - often appear from below. Thus in these contexts particular animal symbols can portray forces working in different realms upon the other symbols in the central space of the emblem. This structure can be found in many emblems. A number of such examples are seen in the *Pandora* series. We will just here look at emblem seven from this series which shows the hermaphrodite in the central space of the emblem being worked on from below by a two headed dragon form.

Dragons are often related to the element of fire. They are often depicted breathing out fire. Salamanders or lizards are most often shown in fire. Toads and snakes in water or lower places in the emblem space.



Let us now proceed to look at some examples of emblems in which animal symbols play a significant part. In these exercises, you should identify all the animal forms, and also try and see if they are placed within a particular part of the space of the emblem. See if there is a clear and definite animal symbol around which the emblem focusses. This may not necessarily be in the exact centre of the emblem. Try to see if the same animal symbols might reflect different aspects of the alchemical work in different emblems. "A rose is a rose is a rose" said Gertrude Stein, but in alchemy the symbol of a lion (or whatever) may not always represent the same thing alchemically. It is very difficult for some people to accept this, but it is the key to understanding alchemical symbolism. We cannot just draw up a simple dictionary and look up the meaning of a symbol. Instead we have to view each symbol in an emblem in the context of that emblem space. If there were a simple system of meanings assigned to each symbol then alchemy would have been exhausted and explained years ago. That is why in the early lessons of this course we had to lay the foundations for exploring the geometry and polarities of emblems, instead of jumping straight into individual symbols. You will see the value of having these foundations, when, later in this course, you are able to integrate all these approaches together, and begin to have the tools to analyse clearly the content of alchemical emblems.

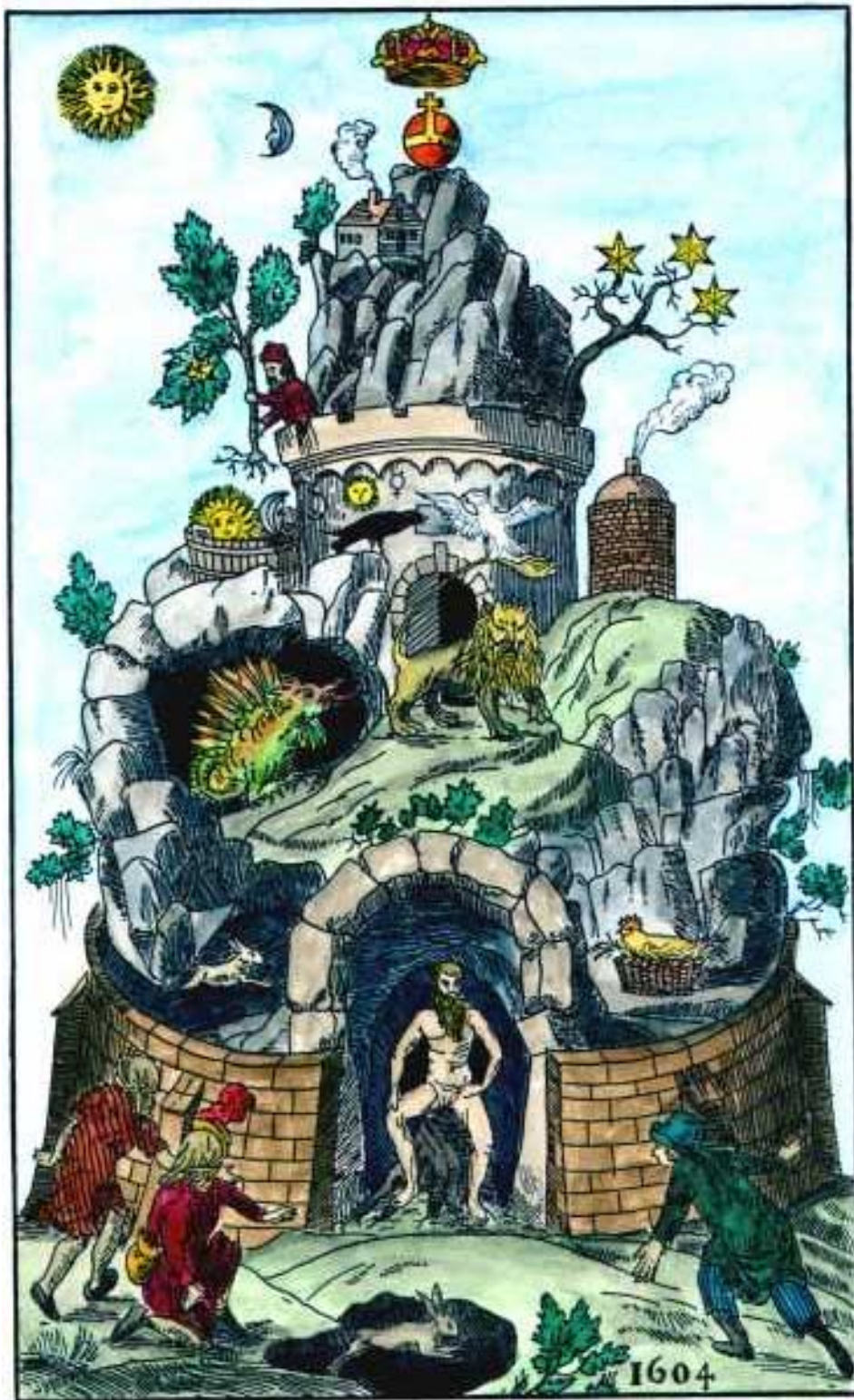
**Example 1.** *Azoth* series emblem 13.



Example 2. Mylius' *Philosophia reformata* series emblem 4.



**Example 3.** Engraving from Denis Zachaire *Die Natürliche Philosophia*.



Example 4. The second woodcut from *Pandora*.





Example 5. Engraving from Mylius Basilica chemica.

