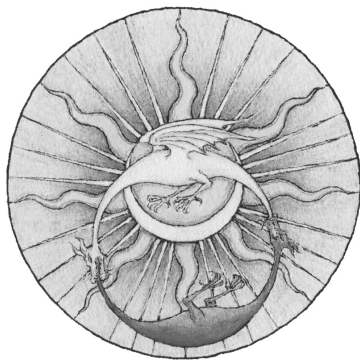


# The Volatile and the Fixed

By Nigel Jackson



‘Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,  
and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’

(Matthew 16:19)

**T**he emblem, adapted from imagery in the so-called ‘Ripley Scrowle,’ presents a symbolic exposition of the royal wedding of the Sun and the Moon in alchemy, and of the cyclical modes of volatilization and fixation in the Great Work, in accordance with the hermetic axiom ‘solve et coagula.’

*‘In this Art you must wed the Sun and the Moon’* (Exposition of the Letter of King Alexander). The Sun is the noetic principle of Spiritus, the Moon the plastic medium/matrix of the psyche or Anima (sometimes one encounters these correlations esoterically transposed to signify the contingent and cosmological plane of interpretation). As Titus Burckhardt says *‘The marriage of Sulphur and Quicksilver, Sun and Moon, King and Queen, is the central symbol of alchemy.’*<sup>1</sup>

In metaphysical terms the dry, golden and igneous, solar quality of Sulphur is the vertical axis of the ‘celestial ray,’ and the humid, silvery and watery lunar quality of Mercury is the horizontal ‘plane of reflection,’ their interaction or neutralization giving rise to and crystallizing in Salt, the corporeal form.

<sup>1</sup> Burckhardt, Titus, *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, ch. 11.

Traditionally depicted under the imagery of hieroglyphic ‘chymical weddings’ and enigmatic ‘hermetic combats’ these interactions between Sulphur and Mercury are reflected on the lowest and most exterior levels in the perpetual play of mysterious attractions and antagonisms between the sexes.

The alternating ‘circulations’ or cycles of volatilization and fixation are seen in the ouroboric dragons, white and red, devouring each other’s tails or emerging from each other’s mouths. Titus Burckhardt comments upon the symbolic significance of the winged and wingless dragons in hermetic lore. The wings always denote the flight or subtle ascent of the volatile principle, while winglessness denotes the fixed or stable quality. René Guénon, in *The Great Triad* has explicitly associated the volatile and the fixed with the ‘power of the keys’ in the Gospel of Matthew (16:19) ‘*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*’

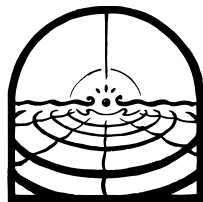
This alchemical symbolism is cognate with Far Eastern images of the Yin-Yang and with the unfolding and in-folding ‘double spiral’ motif encountered in archaic petroglyphs and prehistoric art-forms. Here, as Guénon has pointed out, there is reference to the ‘dual current’ or phases of the subtle cosmic ambience, the ‘astral light’ of Paracelsus or ‘double Mercury’ of the alchemists (the two serpents entwining the caduceus-wand of Hermes). The ‘animation’ of Mercury by the golden seed of Sulphur itself gives rise to this dual cosmic action, phases or modalities, manifesting as loosening or solution and binding or fixation.

Guénon discusses the Indian and Chinese teachings regarding ‘universal “expiration” and “inspiration” by which are produced, according to Taoist terminology, the “condensations” and “dissipations” resulting from the alternate action of Yin and Yang, or according to Hermetic terminology, the “coagulations” and “solutions”; for individual beings, these are births and deaths, what Aristotle called “genesis” and “phthora,” “generation” and “corruption”; for worlds, they are what Hindu tradition calls “the days and nights of Brahma,” like the Kalpa and the Pralaya; and at all degrees, in the macrocosmic order, there are corresponding phases in every cycle of existence, for they are the very expression of the law that governs the sum total of universal manifestation.’<sup>2</sup> In the Quranic

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<sup>2</sup> Guénon, René, *The Great Triad*, ch.5.

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