



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

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## Lesson Thirteen : The dragon.

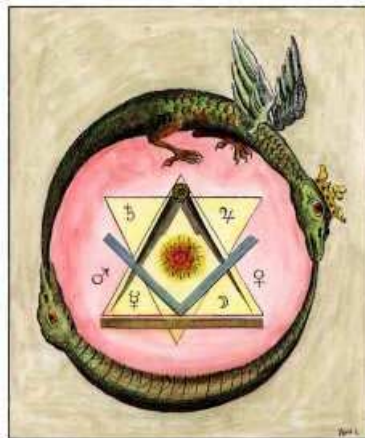
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The dragon is, of course, a widely used symbol in alchemical emblems, but it is so often confused with the snake, the ouroboros or the salamander that we must always take care to identify it properly.

One of the obvious identifying characteristics is that it often appears breathing out flames. The salamander, depicted as a dragon-like lizard, is shown living in fire but not breathing out fire. So this is relatively easy to discriminate from the dragon.



The ouroboros is such a coherent and strong symbol that we should allow it to take precedence, even though the form may appear more dragon-like than snake.



The snake is more associated with dampness and is in many cases depicted moving on the surface of the earth, or in a liquid in a flask. The dragon is often, though not always, seen as lurking in a cave or in the lower part of the emblem space. It is important to be able to differentiate between these different symbols, which are sometimes depicted in a similar manner. In some cases these have become conflated or merged together, especially in alchemical manuscripts, where the imperfect drawings of one alchemical writer are copied by another.



Dragons are often shown with wings, though rarely in the act of flying. In a sense the dragon bears within it the potential for flying or rising up, but its main manifestation is as a creature of the lower realms. In this way it is a kind of opposite to birds, which as we have seen in an earlier lesson, fly up and down, moving between the upper and lower realms of the emblem space. The dragon, while often bearing wings, does not seem to use them in alchemical emblems.

The dragon is sometimes shown with multiple heads - usually three, four or seven. These can correspond to the three principles (salt, sulphur mercury), the four elements or the seven planets.

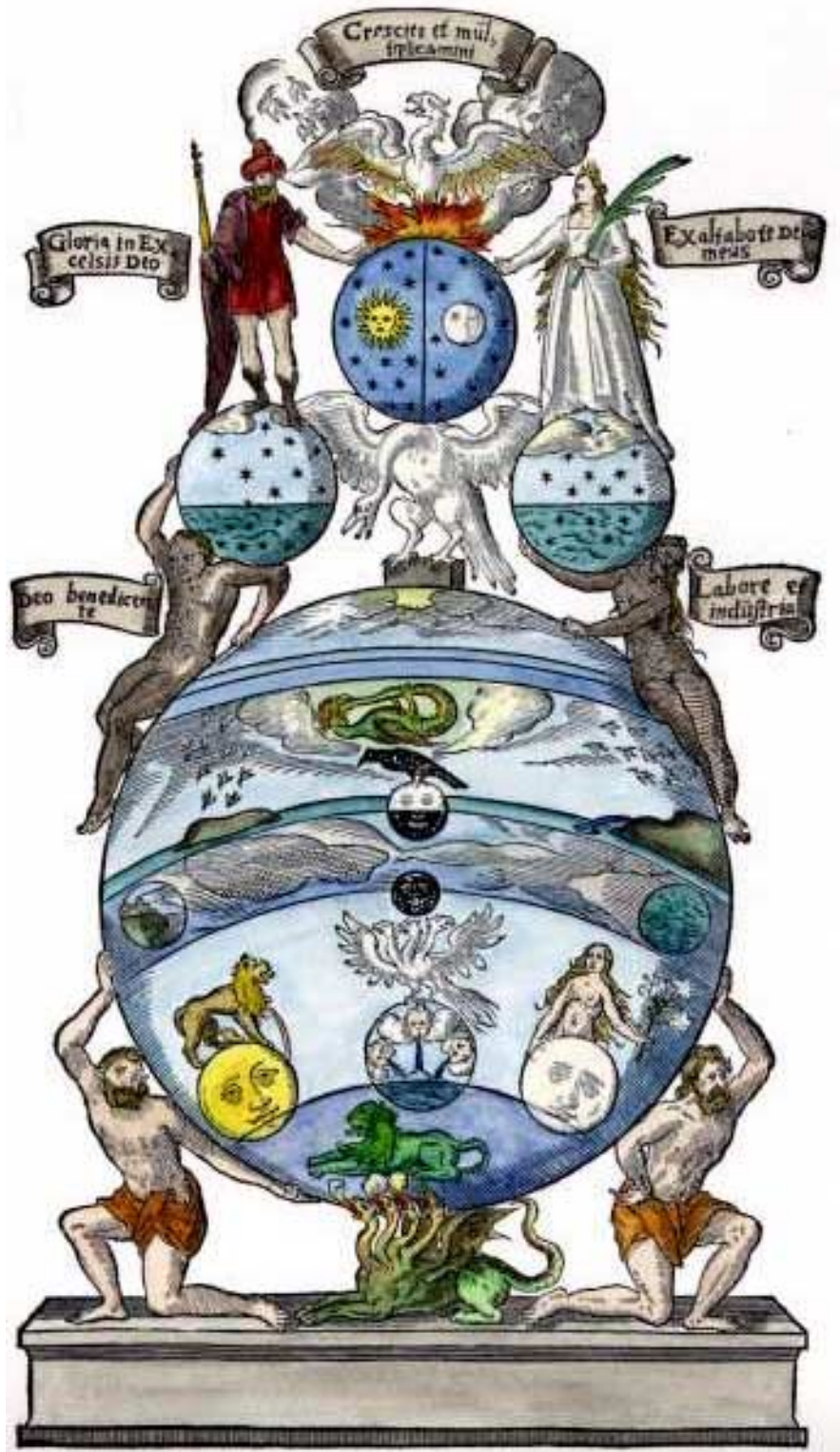


## Exercises:

For the exercises, you should look at the emblem and try and see if what is depicted is actually symbolically a dragon. Discriminate between the snake form, the ouroboros and the dragon. Also try and see just how the dragon appears in the emblem - does it occupy the lower part of the image or is it shown lurking underground. Re-examine the previous lesson on the lion and try and sense the different ways in which these two symbols appear in the emblem space. The dragon often appears as a devouring aspect coming from below, but it can equally be a general image for fire or the transforming heat.

We have now just passed the half-way point in this course. Over the past six months we have examined the nature of symbols in emblems, the geometrical arrangements in which they are laid out, and looked at the individual characteristics of some particular symbols in some detail. We now must begin to integrate the knowledge gained through our developing some abilities in using these analytical methods. So at this point I would ask you to review the course from the beginning to make sure you have grasped all the ideas we have explored so far.

Example 1. Woodcut from Andreas Libavius *Commentariorum alchymiae*.



Example 2. Sixth woodcut from the series in Basil Valentine's *Azoth*.



Example 3. . Woodcut from Giovanni Battista Nazari *Il metamorfosi metallico*.



Example 4. Frontispiece from Johann Daniel Mylius *Philosophia reformatata*.  
[Note the dragon is shown in opposition to the bird.]



Example 5. Engraving from Thomas Vaughan *Lumen de lumine*.





Example 6. Two images from the *Book of Lambspring*.



Example 6. Woodcut from Thurneisser *Quinta Essentia*.

