



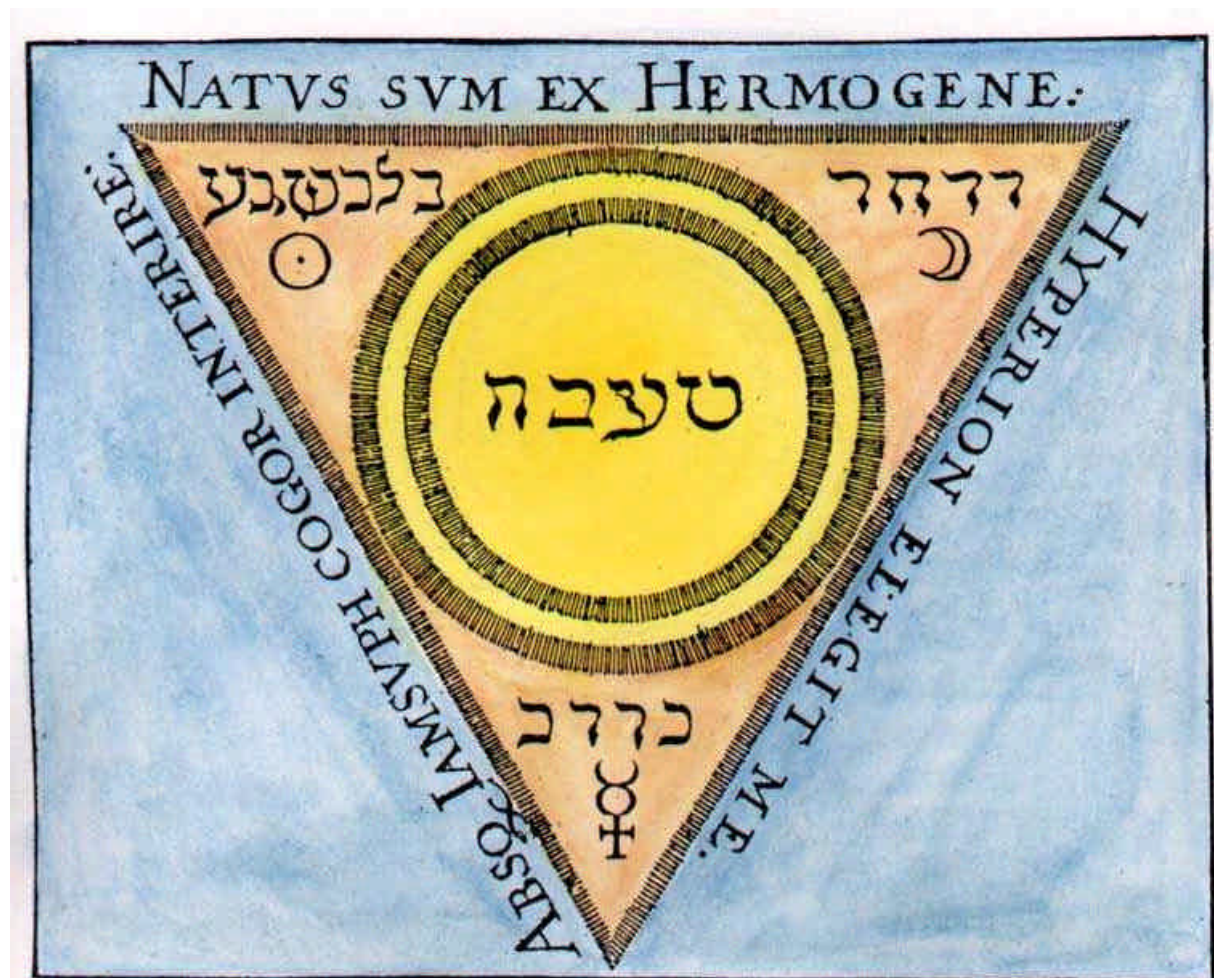
# Adam McLean's Study Course on Inner alchemy and alchemical symbolism

## Lesson Three : Triangles, squares and circles in emblems.

In our second lesson we examined the relatively simple vertical and horizontal geometry found in emblems. This, of course, can be worked into a extremely complex grouping of symbols, for example in the Mylius Basilica Chemica image of the Macrocosm and Microcosm. You must make yourself familiar with this structure, as it is found in most emblems, and as we will see in later sections of this course, this will provide us with ways of reading emblems from inside their structure, rather than projecting external interpretations upon them.

There are other geometric forms in alchemical emblems and we will investigate some of these in this lesson.

### The triangle



Of course alchemists do not always make things so easy for us as to draw in the lines of the triangle in such an obvious way. Usually the triangular geometry is much more subtly suggested in the placement of symbols.



Salamander in Fire

Birds in Air

Water at base of the mountains

A downward pointing triangle with the earth globe at its centre.

Triangles can either point upwards or downwards. I cannot think of an example where they point to the left or right. As we will see in latter lessons the upward pointing triangle can be seen as the earthly striving upwards, a spiritualisation of the material, and the downward pointing triangle may in some contexts be seen as a descent of spirit into material. At this stage we must hold off from making such interpretations until we have a better grasp of alchemical symbolism. Please try to work through these lessons and their exercises without leaping immediately to overlay your personal interpretation upon these emblematic figures. We should only move to interpret these emblems once we have sufficient experience of analysing and investigating the symbols in a wide variety of examples.

Sometimes the vertices of triangles are occupied by Sun, Moon and Mercury symbols. Othertimes they are related to the three principles Salt, Sulphur and Mercury.

Salt



Sulphur



Mercury



We will see meet these often in alchemical emblems. Here is the woodcut on the title page of the French edition of Basil Valentine's *Azoth*, 1624. The upward pointing triangle has Sun, Moon, Mercury; while the downward pointing triangle has Salt, Sulphur and Mercury.



I will include this as an exercise so you can identify all the symbols and the other geometrical arranged components. Though these two triangles are here separate, sometimes they interlace forming the Solomon's Seal. We will look at this in a later lesson.



## The Square

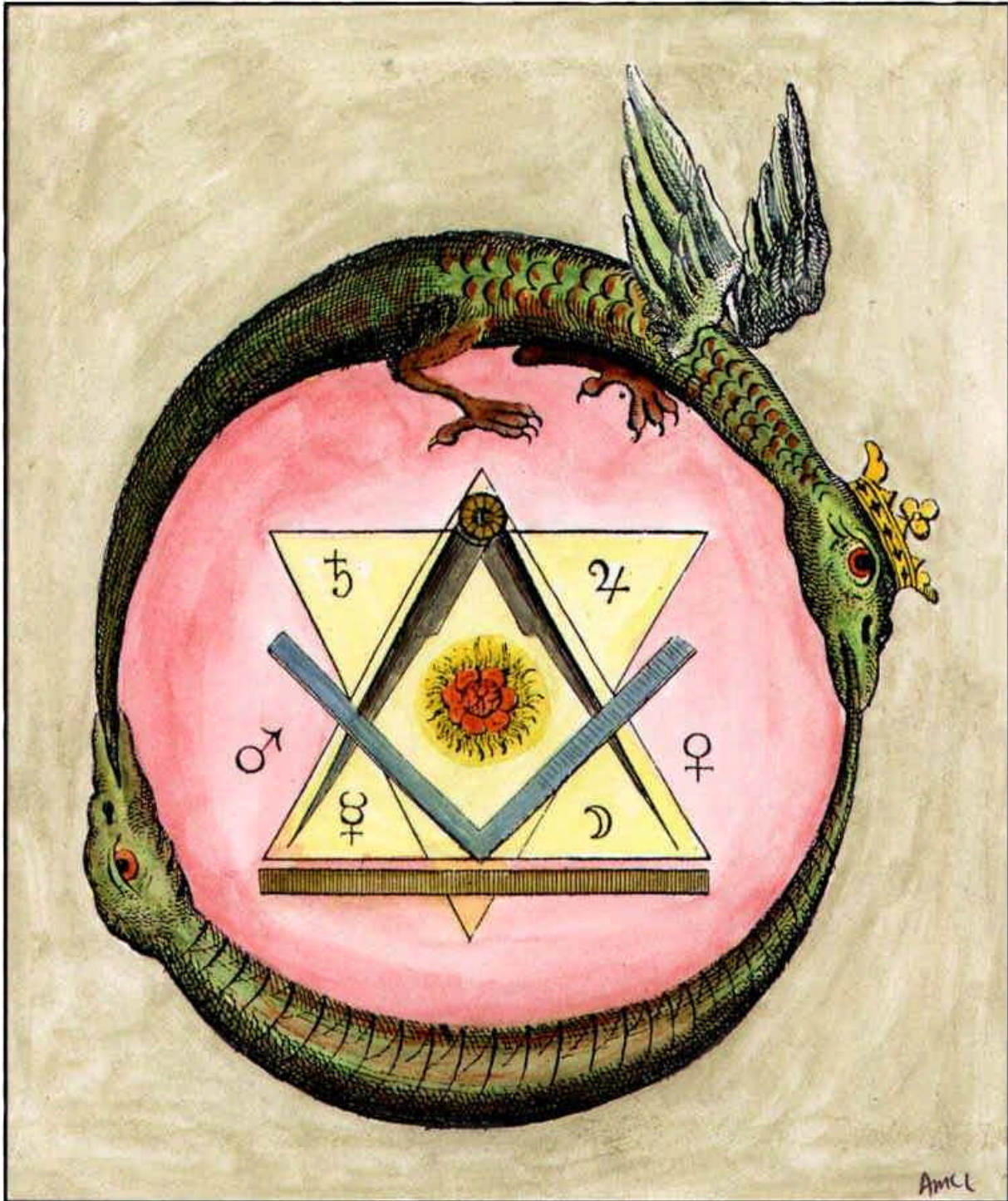
Symbols in alchemical emblems are often arranged in squares. These often are related to the four elements, but not exclusively so. This pattern can often be confused with (and can overlap with) the horizontal and vertical geometry we examined in the previous lesson. In this emblem from the *Musaeum Hermeticum* we see the four elements around the square frame of the engraving. To help identify the four elements, we often see Fire related to the salamander, Air to clouds and wind, Water to the sea, a spring, or a river, and Earth to the globe, or to surface of the earth.





## Circular arrangements

Symbols are sometimes arranged in the form of a circle. This should be quite obvious, though the circle is not necessarily drawn in for you. The circular arrangement does not necessarily preclude the two-fold (horizontal or vertical arrangement), or indeed the triangle or square pattern which are often imposed on the circle. Here is an engraving coloured by myself from I.C. H., *Das Hermes Trismegists*, Leipsig, 1782, related to the illustrations in the 'Golden Chain of Homer'. It incorporates the interlaced triangles we mentioned above.



# Examples

Again I present you with a number of examples. As before, please begin by recognising and listing the individual symbols of which the emblem is composed. Then move on to identify the main geometric patterns underlying the symbols and draw a little diagram associating the symbols with the geometric pattern. Thus we can make the following diagram for the emblem shown above.



Winged snake or dragon - snake or dragon - head - tail- crown - compasses - set square - ruler - Saturn - Jupiter - Mars -Venus - Mercury - Moon - Sun (at centre) - seven petalled rose (on top of the Sun)

Twofold Vertical :

Winged snake - snake  
Compasses - ruler

Twofold Horizontal :

Jupiter - Saturn  
Mars - Venus  
Mercury - Moon

Triangles :

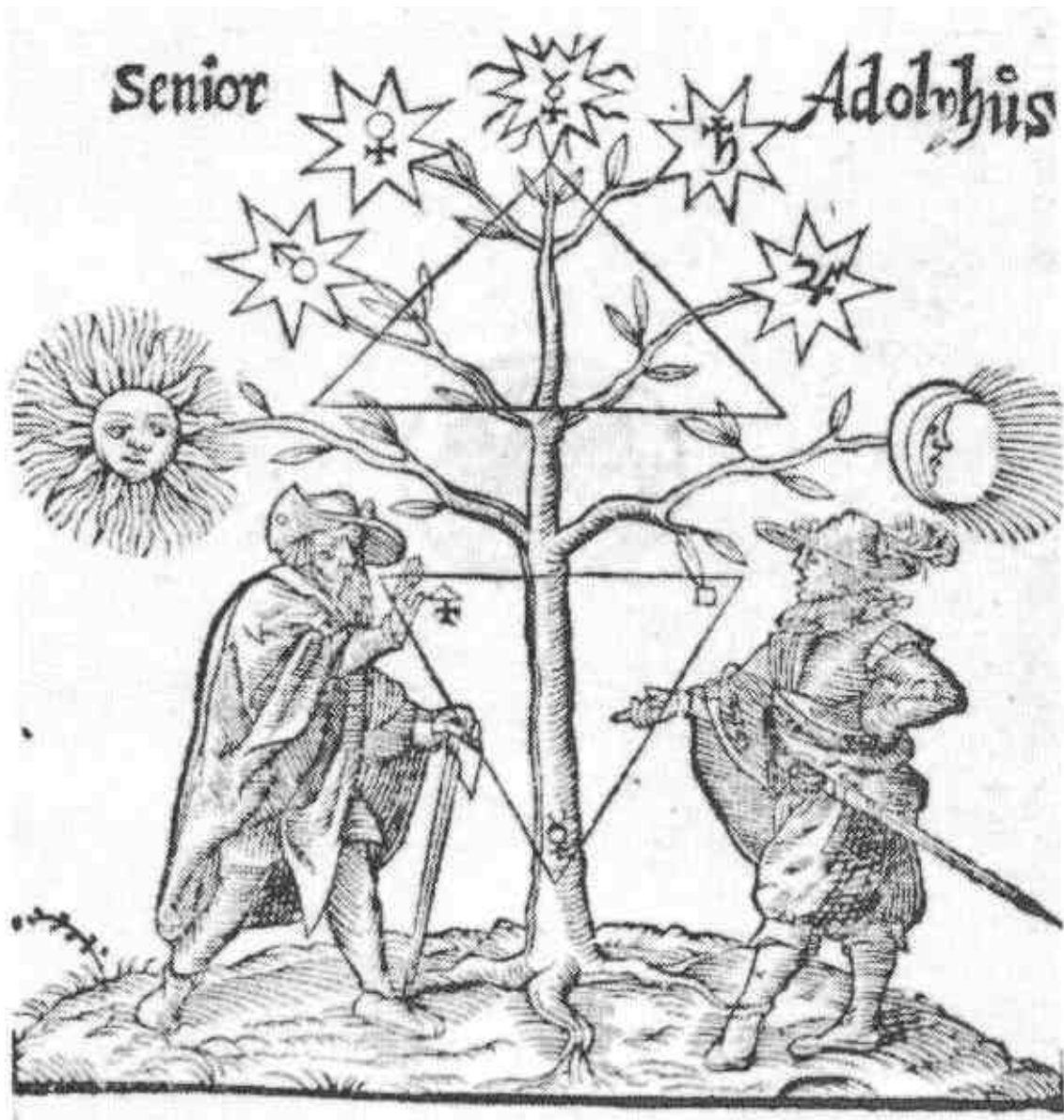
Upward pointing triangle with Mercury and Moon on lower vertices, and compasses at upper vertex.

Downward pointing triangle with Saturn and Jupiter on upper vertices and set square (or perhaps ruler) at lower vertex.

Circle :

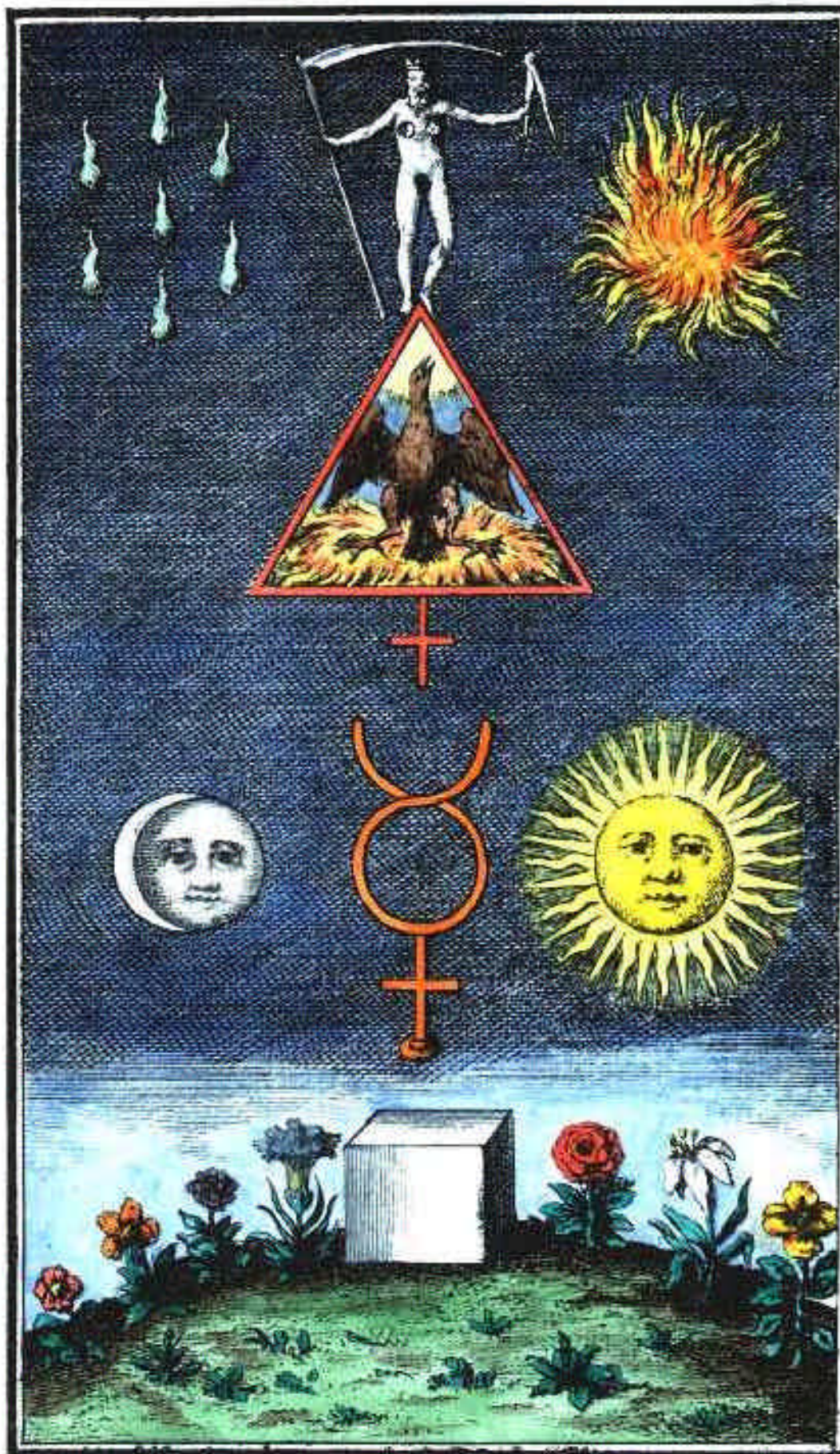
Winged snake - snake (forming double ouroboros) centred around the Sun.

Example 1 : Basil Valentine's *Azoth*, 1624.



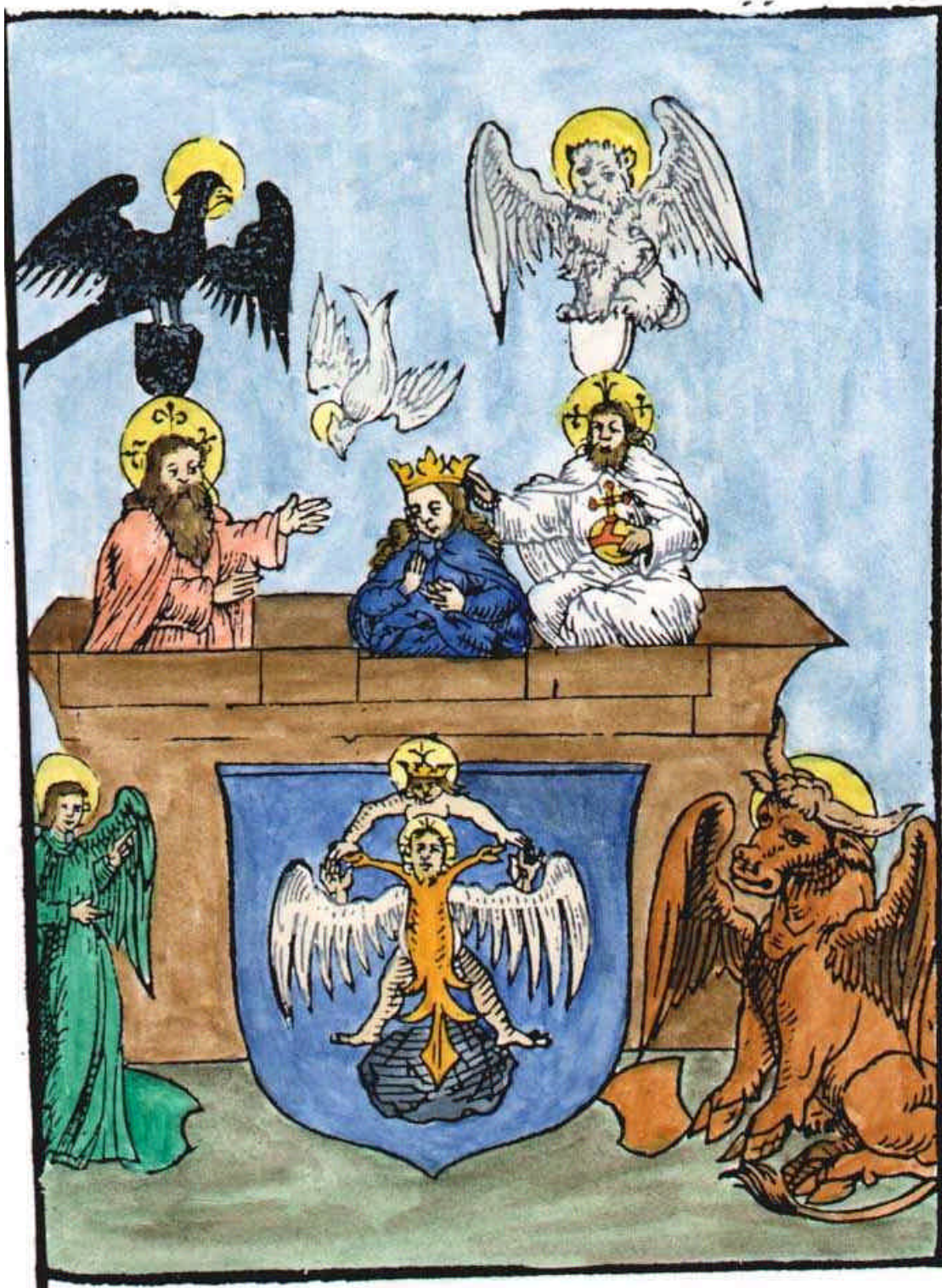


Example 2 : 18th century engraving based on work of Basil Valentine.

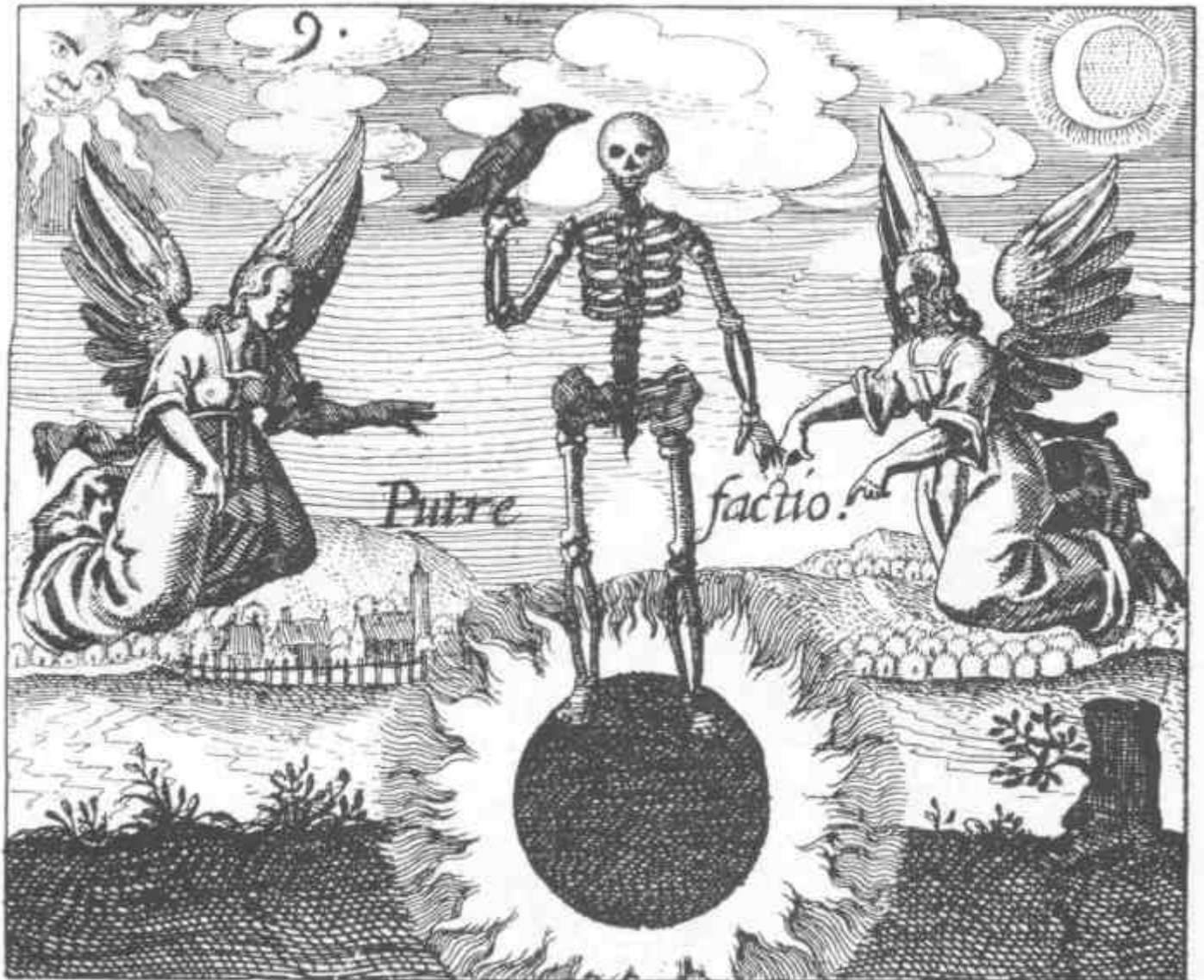




Example 3: Reusner's *Pandora* woodcut 14, based on the 'Book of the Holy Trinity early 15th century manuscript.



Example 4 : Mylius, Philosophia reformata, 1622, emblem 9.





Example 5 : Vitriol acrostic from Valentine's *Azoth* series. This contains a sevenfold structure in addition to those we have investigated above.



Example 6 : Another Vitriol acrostic from Valentine's *Azoth* series. Please note this is not a circular arrangement. If you think there is a circular arrangement here, then you have not understood this lesson and probably also need to reread the previous one as well.

