

The Alchemical Monuments of Paris

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Initiatic Section

I

We understand by “alchemical monument” any symbolic building initially built entirely or partly by an alchemist, or which has later received a hermetic interpretation by the puffers*, although the founder was an unknown character. Flamel’s foundations fall into the first category. Notre-Dame of Paris and Sainte-Chapelle are especially classified in the second one. For the latter, we will put forth nothing that has not been written either by writers who have had to deal with the issue, or by alchemists themselves. There are relatively few written documents; they are found scattered in Sauval, abbot Villain, Gohorry, Borel, La Croix du Maine, etc. As regards the treatises dedicated extensively to the question, we know only about two, one owed to Gobineau de Montluisant and the other to the Sieur de la Borde.

We will first say a few words about the missing monuments: at the forefront are Nicholas Flamel’s foundations¹. In 1389, the illustrious adept erected an arcade at Holy Innocents’ Cemetery. A colonnade similar to that of Rivoli Street surrounded the cemetery.

This arcade stood on the front of the cemetery near Lingerie Street; it was marked with the N and F, initials that we find in all Flamel’s foundations. He had painted an entirely black man extending an arm to a second arcade that he built later and loaded with hieroglyphs. The figure was holding with the other hand a scroll on which was written: ‘I see marvels many of which “strike me.”’ Furthermore, on the same arcade in front of the black man was a golden plate on which one could see an eclipse or conjunction of the Sun and the Moon and another planet characterized by the sign of

* Puffer (*noun*) - One who claims achievement in Alchemy but has insufficient knowledge of the operations.

(1) All information on Flamel is taken from a book on which M. Poisson is working at this time: *Life of Nicolas Flamel*. To be published in May 1893. (Editor’s Note)

Venus or Mercury rather. There were other plates underneath that one, including one representing a shield divided into four by a cross; the latter was bearing a crown of thorns containing in its center a bleeding heart where a reed was standing. In one of the quarters we see YHVH in Hebrew characters in the midst of a crowd of light rays over a black cloud; in the second quarter a cloud on which are seen a trumpet, a spear, a palm, and a crown; in the third we see the earth filled with a rich harvest, and in the fourth globes of fire.

That arcade had the same fate as the rest of Flamel's foundations. It was gradually destroyed by the superstitious and greedy visitors who removed stone fragments as souvenirs, pieces of the golden metal to try its virtue. In the time of Borel, there were four golden plates on the arcade, three in the time of Gohorry and none at all in the eighteenth century. Finally, in 1761, this arcade was rebuilt, and what remained of it disappeared.

That same year of 1389, Flamel erected with his own funds the small portal of Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie Church, facing Marivaux Street. He was represented with his wife Pernelle, and on the western jamb of the door was a small carved angel holding in its hands a stone disc in which was embedded a black marble disc in which was enclosed a sealed golden cross. This magic gold must have tempted the puffers many times; yet an unscrupulous but avid alchemist stole it only in the mid-seventeenth century.

In 1407, Flamel erected a second arcade at the Holy Innocents' Cemetery, much more interesting than the first, because Flamel himself has explained to us its double hermetic and theological meaning in his *Book of Hieroglyphic Figures*. We find a reproduction of these figures on the cover of *Theories and Symbols* from M. Poisson. On the side of the arcade could first be seen a writing tablet locked in a small niche, this is the symbol of the philosophical egg enclosed in the Athanor.

To the left stood Saint Paul, dressed in a citrine robe embroidered with gold, holding a naked sword. At his feet was Flamel himself dressed in an orange, white, and black robe; it is the symbolic indication of the colors taken by the philosopher's stone when it changes from black to white. On the side, that is to say in the middle of the arcade, on a green background, three characters are resurrecting, two men and a woman all entirely white, two angels above and overlooking the angels, the face of the Savior coming to judge the world, wearing a white and citrine dress. The green background shows that among other colors of the work, between blackness and whiteness, greenness sometimes appears. The three risen ones are the body, the spirit,

and the soul (Sulfur, Salt, and Mercury), the stone components. The white stone or small elixir is the Lord.

To the right, pairing with Saint Paul, Saint Peter could be seen wearing a red robe, with a key in the right hand; kneeling at his feet, Pernelle wears an orange dress; this group symbolizes the red color that appears last and indicates the delightful success of the work. So we find, by proceeding from left to right, the three main colors of the work. Smaller figures, distributed in decorative borders below the three groups described above, symbolized the principles of matter and the operations of the Great Work.

These were Flamel's main foundations, but since this adept had decorated with hieroglyphs all his houses, all the churches he patronized, the alchemists visited in addition to the Cemetery of the Innocents and Saint-Jacques Church, the portal of Sainte-Geneviève-des-Ardents, his numerous houses in Montmorency Street and Saint-Martin Street; the church of Saint Nicolas-des-Champs; the chapel of Saint-Gervais Hospital, etc. Little or nothing remains of these numerous monuments: the mutilated Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs Church; the bell tower of Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie, known as the Saint-Jacques Tower, and the tombstone of Nicolas Flamel in the Cluny Museum! If some churches endowed by Flamel were destroyed by revolutionary vandalism, several of his foundations had to suffer especially from greedy puffers, such as the arcades of the Innocents' Cemetery and especially the house he lived at the corner of Marivaux and Ecrivains Streets (Writers' Street) opposite the small gate of Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie Church. Sauval related the story in a few words. It was the basement of the house of Ecrivains Street that was the most visited, because that is where, according to Tradition, Flamel retreated to work.

In 1624, an alchemist friar, Father Pacifique, had large excavations run on the site unsuccessfully; after him, came a wealthy German nobleman who turned the house upside down, without finding anything whatsoever. Then a woman who lived in the house found in a place not yet searched some flasks full of the philosopher's stone, but ignoring what it was, she threw it away, thinking certainly that it was some unknown, perhaps dangerous drug. The research and excavation did not stop until the house itself had disappeared.

II

No more than two buildings exist now, the most important being without contest Notre-Dame of Paris. According to tradition, most of the

hermetic hieroglyphs of the cathedral were executed on the instructions of William, Bishop of Paris and learned alchemist.

The triple portal is the most outstanding alchemical part of the monument; we find the explanation in the fourth volume of the Library of chemical philosophers, under the title: *Very curious explanation of the mysteries and hieroglyphic and physical figures at the great portal of the metropolitan and cathedral church of Notre-Dame of Paris, by Mr. Esprit Gobineau de Montluisant, friend of the alchemical and natural philosophy*. Here is the summary of this explanation: The left portal represents, above, God the Father, holding a man and an angel, it is the spirit or rather the universal matter, the wet radical, the Hyle of the Greeks, which, by a differentiation, generates two principles: Sulfur and Mercury.

This is the supercelestial world. Below, are two angels; they represent the heavenly seed or the universal spirit descending from the upper world to fertilize the second world or celestial area. The other symbols represent the lower or terrestrial world. It shows three children in the clouds, who, it seems, are the three principles: Sulfur, Salt, and Mercury. Then come the symbols of air, water, and earth, which are the lower elements, fire being the higher element. A bull and a ram indicate the months of March and April: matter is prepared in March, and in April the mixture is made, the flask is sealed and the work begins. A sleeping man and two vials or flasks signify the radical salt of all things attracting Universal Life or astral light. Finally, we note below four stone figures from ground level: a dragon, is the philosopher's stone; a mascarons that represents the Sophists, puffers, and cacochymists; a dog and a bitch which are the dog of Armenia and the Corascene dog, mythical animals symbolizing the fixed and volatile that can be seen on every page in philosophers' writings; and finally a lion, symbolizing the vibrant salt. It should be noted that there are many other figures in this portal, but they had no significance for the alchemists, since Gobineau de Montluisant disdainfully leaves them aside. He then goes on to describe the hermetic hieroglyphs of the right portal. The twelve signs of the zodiac first catch the eye, but this is what Gobineau has to say:

In the first part of the right side are the signs of the water bearer (Aquarius) and the fishes (Pisces), inactive, which one must notice and note. Then come the ram (Aries), the bull (Taurus), and the twins (Gemini) in activity, one above the other. And above the twins is the sign of Leo, though out of place, since it is the crab's (Cancer) place, but we must consider this a mystery. The signs of Aquarius and Pisces are inactive; the goal is to specifically signify that it not

possible to have or gather universal matter during the two months of January and February. As regards the ram (Aries) and the bull (Taurus) and the twins (Gemini) in activity, one below the other, and ruling in March, April, and May, they indicate that it is in this time that the alchemical sage should pay attention to matter and take it precisely when it comes down from heaven and from the airy fluid, where it only kisses the lips of the mixtures then passes over the belly of the submissive plant buds and vegetal leaves, for a triumphant entry under these three universal principles in the bodies, through their golden doors, and there become the seed of the heavenly dew, symbolically speaking.

A flying dragon looks at Aries, Taurus, and Gemini, months in which are performed the major operations of the work. One must, however, point out to the figures of the four seasons corresponding to the four elements.

Finally Gobineau translates for us the symbols of the central portal. On the right can be seen an eagle which is the Universal Spirit, a caduceus which contains the two principles, Sulfur and Mercury, the Fixed and the Volatile, a Phoenix which is the red Stone, a Ram indicating as above the month in which to start the work, a man holding a chalice, which is the magnet made by the adept whom the Philaethes speaks of so much in his *Open Entrance to the Closed Palace of the King*. Last is seen a cross, the universal symbol of the four elements. It is still at the central portal that we find the five wise virgins and the five foolish virgins in which the alchemist Claude Frollo is much interested in the novel by Victor Hugo: *Notre-Dame of Paris*.

We will mention again, at the left portal, the pillar that divides the entrance representing a bishop trampling a dragon. Gobineau mentioned it and Cambriel did after him. Here is Cambriel's interpretation:

At the bottom of this hieroglyph... are on the left side and the side of the Hôtel-Dieu (the old one), two small protruding full spheres representing the metal materials, raw or coming out of the mine... on the opposite side are also the same two spheres or materials, but worked or ridden of the dirt of the mines that were used to create them. And in front, on the side of the square by the entrance of the church, are also the same two spheres or materials but improved or completely ridden of the dirt of the mines by means of the earlier fusions. The first are the metal materials needed to begin the hermetic work. The second ones, when transformed, manifest to us their inner virtue and relate to this man who is in a box, which,

being surrounded and covered in flaming fire is born in the fire. And the third ones, improved or completely freed from the dirt refer to the Babylonian dragon or Philosophical mercury, in which are combined all the virtues of metallic materials... This bishop has a finger to his mouth to tell one who sees it and come to learn what it represents: "If you recognize and guess what I stand for by this hieroglyph, say nothing..."

Some of these sculptures still exist in part; the ones we are going to discuss were destroyed. One could see on the right, on entering the nave, a colossal statue of Saint Christopher. He was portrayed crossing the waters, carrying the infant Jesus on his shoulders. This statue was twenty-eight feet high. Erected in 1413 by Antoine des Essarts, it still existed in the eighteenth century. Des Essarts, watched his brother Peter (compromised like him in the party of the Duke of Burgundy) beheaded at the Halles, and he himself had escaped from prison only by a miracle; the statue of Saint Christopher was only the fulfillment of a vow made in his escape.

So there was nothing alchemical in it, which did not prevent the puffers to see in this statue a symbol of matter. What strengthened them in this opinion is that, in the reeds figured at the feet of Saint Christopher, and also on the pedestal of the statue of Antoine des Essarts, were represented two vials.

At the bottom of the nave, on the left side, a gravestone could be seen leaning against the church wall, next to the stairs of the tower. The singularity of this stone justified the attention of the alchemists. It could be divided into three parts. In the upper plane or heavenly world, we see Jesus Christ sitting surrounded by a halo and a globe under his feet. His raised right hand made the esoteric mysterious sign; with his left hand he holds an open book; two swords come out of his mouth. He is surrounded by flames and by a row of twelve angels. In the four corners are depicted four angels blowing trumpets. Christ is the red stone; the twelve angels, the twelve operations; the four celestial musicians, the four elements; the globe symbolizes perfection. A man rising from a tomb occupies the median plane. To the right, a man holds a chalice from which emerge four snakes; on the left, a haloed saint holds a closed book; all this relates to the white stone. In the lower level lies a corpse eaten by worms: the representation of black stone; operation: putrefaction; color: the raven head. In summary, the three planes are the three principles: the body, the spirit, and the soul (sulfur, salt, and mercury), and finally evolution passing successively from black to white, then red.

Apart from the tombstone of Canon Etienne Yvert and the statue of Saint Christopher, most of the other hieroglyphs and above all the portal were attributed to William of Paris.

In addition, some alchemists state, as related by Sauval, that it was he who erected at the entrance to the square in front of the church, just in front of the Hotel-Dieu, this tall and poorly made statue with snakes at its feet, but they do not know whether it is his face or that of Mercury. For, since in the days of old public education was dispensed in the square in front of churches, which moreover is a space and this figure is set in a crossroads, scholars hold that it is a Mercury or Therme that has been placed there in imitation of the Ancients.

And further:

It is, they said, the same bishop William who had engraved in the portal a *lapis-lazuli* colored stone with gold on the edges, the Job that one sees among his friends who mock him with these words: *Patientia, Job*; that by Job he figured the philosopher's stone whose mater has to suffer all kinds of alterations and martyrizations by the relation of R. Lull before reaching its perfection: *sub conservatione formae specificæ salva anima*.

Similarly, the sacrifice of Abraham with an angel, a sheep, and a faggot [a bundle of sticks for a fire], is the sun, fire, and the craftsperson, the three parties that compose the stone and the work. The long theory of the twenty-eight kings that adorn the facade was also given, according to them, a hermetic meaning. They went further and claimed that William of Paris had sealed a provision of the philosopher's stone in one of the pillars of the choir, and on one of the doors is seen a crow whose gaze is directed at the exact point where the Philosophical treasure is located and they related to the fact that this crow is the only one of all the sculptures of the triple portal, that looks into the interior of the church.

III

Finally, still according to Sauval, the Hermetists claimed to find alchemy at the portal of the Sainte-Chapelle. "The one at the Sainte-Chapelle is one of them of which they say are all full of hieroglyphs; they strongly base their assumption on two angels one of which is sticking its hand in a cloud and the other in a pot."

There were many other alchemical sites in Paris in the Middle Ages, such as the large iron andirons of Ferronnerie Street, the sower of the stained glass window of Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie Church, etc.

In summary, Paris was the most important Alchemy center in the Middle Ages, while Spain and Italy had very few alchemists, because of the persecutions by the Inquisition; France, more tolerant, as it were, served as a refuge for hermetic scholars. For an alchemist to be persecuted in this country, he had to have a case with the king himself. Puffer if he deceived him, adept if he refused to reveal his secret, the result was exile or death. But those facts having occurred only twice in France are nothing compared to the burning of books in Spain, the hangings carried out in Germany and Italy; also this relative tolerance was enough to explain the great number of alchemists in France in the good old days. Alchemy has now lost its former splendor and, to our knowledge, there is hardly in our country fifty practicing alchemists; the number is much higher in England and especially in the Germanic countries. For most, they are highly educated and have found their convictions in chemistry. We wish them, these brothers, to find and shake the old building that has also become inadequate for modern chemistry.

This article was written by Philophotes (“Lover of the Light”), which was the pseudonym of Albert Poisson (1868 - 1894), a passionate French alchemist who studied with Papus. When Poisson died at the age of twenty-four, he bequeathed his library to Papus and Marc Haven. His book entitled *The History of Alchemy, Fourteenth Century, Nicolas Flamel, His Life, His Foundation, His Works* is part of the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library. The bookplates in the version of this book shown below demonstrate that it once belonged to Papus (bookplate on left), then to Rosicrucian Emperor H. Spencer Lewis (bookplate on right.) Later, the book belonged to Sovereign Grand Master Ralph M. Lewis.

