

**CONTRIBUTIONS OF
ALCHEMY TO
NUMISMATICS**

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Contributions of alchemy to numismatics by Henry Carrington Bolton

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HENRY CARRINGTON BOLTON

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XXXVIII.



ALCHEMICAL MEDALS.

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OF
ALCHEMY TO NUMISMATICS

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THE doctrine of the transmutation of metals prevailed in many nations at an early period of their intellectual development. It seems to have been an outgrowth of primitive notions concerning the constitution of matter, one element or principle being regarded as fundamental and capable of giving birth to the others. Water, air, fire and earth were severally regarded as the first principles of all things by Greek philosophers, and these four were adopted by Aristotle. He held, moreover, that these elements are mutually convertible, each having two qualities, one of which was common to some other element. Thus he wrote:

Fire is hot and dry.
Air is hot and moist.
Water is cold and moist.
Earth is cold and dry.

In each element one quality was dominant, and by changing the proportions of the qualities, one element could be changed into the other. This

doctrine was afterwards extended to metallic bodies, and a race of alchemists began to investigate it experimentally. We do not read of attempts to change gold into silver, nor either of these metals into lead, for avarice acted as a mighty stimulus in advancing the inquiry, and a false philosophy sustained it through many hundred years.

[7] In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the belief in the possibility of converting lead into gold and silver was well-nigh universal, and the pursuit of alchemy was followed by persons in every station of life; physicians vainly hoping to discover the Elixir of Life, merchants and tradesmen seeking a short road to riches, peasants and noblemen, beggars and princes with whom avarice was a common motive, each and all courted the fascinating folly. The belief was not confined to the ignorant and unlearned, but was held by the men of science, the theologians, the warriors, and the statesmen of that period. Some who professed to have accomplished the "great work," as the transmutation was called, were undoubtedly self-deceived, owing to the occurrence of certain phenomena which modern chemists have no difficulty in explaining, but which to the experimenters of the Middle Ages seemed conclusive proofs of the wonderful transformation. On the other hand there were many unprincipled impostors who gained a precarious livelihood by pretending to a knowledge of the hermetic art, and who practiced their profession at the bidding and costs of wealthy and credulous devotees of Mammon. These hired laborers in alchemy, anxious to maintain their reputation and to please their patrons, fostered this belief by many tricks and clever impostures. The learned and crafty Dr. John Dee, who enjoyed the patronage of both Rudolph II, the Emperor of Germany, and of Queen Elizabeth of England, when about to seek favors from the latter, sent her a small disc of gold which he claimed to have made by hermetic art from a copper warming-pan; and shortly afterwards Dee forwarded to the Queen, as an unimpeachable witness, the warming-pan itself, having a hole in the copper bottom of the exact size of the piece of gold.

Leonhard Thurneysser, a noted German physician and alchemist, on the 20th of November, 1586, in Rome, performed a miracle with a common iron

nail; the nail was dipped into the melted philosopher's stone, and the iron so far as immersed was transmuted into gold. All of which was solemnly testified to by a Cardinal of the Church; besides, was not the nail itself, half iron and half gold, a tangible witness convincing to the most skeptical?

Believers in the transmutation of metals had however far more satisfactory and authoritative evidences than these questionable specimens, to which they could point with assurance; these were the medals and coins of silver and of gold, duly stamped with the records of the transmutation, commemorating the power of the adept and honoring his noble patron. The number of these hermetic rarities in numismatics is surprisingly large; to catalogue them all would be no easy task; we herein describe forty-three pieces mentioned in literature or preserved in cabinets abroad.

The chief source of information concerning hermetic numismatics is a scarce little quarto published at Kiel in 1692 by Samuel Reyher, and bearing the title "*De Nummis quibusdam ex chymico metallo factis.*" It is a dissertation presented to the Faculty of Jurisprudence of the University. In its 144 pages it includes thirty-seven chapters; the titles of the first five are as follows: Cap. I. *De Nummis Aureis.* II. *De Nummis Argenteis.* III. *De Enigmatibus nonnullis Chymicis.* IV. *De Auro ex Auripigmento.* V. *De Egyptiorum Chrysopeia et de Aureo Vellere.*

As may be inferred from these allusions to the "Enigmas of Chemistry," and to the "Alchemy of the Egyptians and the Golden Fleece," the author was imbued with the credulous spirit that pervaded all branches of philosophy and science at that period. He writes as a historian, but is not thorough, since he fails to catalogue many pieces existing prior to his time.

In the first two chapters, on gold and silver coins respectively, he gives representations of five gold and four silver pieces, besides naming some others. These will be described in their chronological place. We may be pardoned for remarking that Reyher lived and wrote about a century too soon, for after his day a much larger number of these evidences of transmutation and credulity appeared, which would have greatly added to the size and interest of his essay.

Additional information is found in the works of J. David Köhler (*Historischer Münzbelustigungen*. Nürnberg, 1729-1750, 24 vols.), David Samuel Madai (*Vollständiges Thaler-Cabinet*. Königsberg, 1765), Schulthess-Rechberg (*Thaler-Cabinet*. Wien, 1840, 3 vols.), and other numismatic treatises: our chief reliance, however, is on works that belong rather to an alchemical than to a numismatic library; these we shall mention in passing.¹

I. (13th Century).— Among the earliest of the coins, whose undisputed existence was regarded as visible proof of hermetic labors, were the so-called *Rose nobles* made from gold artificially prepared by Raymund Lully. This celebrated alchemist (1235-1315) was invited by Edward II, King of England, about the year 1312, to visit his realm; on his arrival he was furnished with apartments in the Tower of London, where he transmuted base metals into gold; this was afterwards coined at the mint into six millions of nobles, each worth more than three pounds sterling. These Rose, or Raymund nobles as they were also called, were well known to the antiquarians of the sixteenth century, and were reputed to be of finer gold than any other gold coin of that day. On the *obverse* of these coins is represented in a very rude fashion a ship floating on the sea decorated with a royal ensign and carrying the king, who bears in his right hand a naked sword and on his left arm a shield. Around this design: EDWARD D[E]I GRA[TIA] REX ANGL[IE] Z FRANC[IAE] D[OMI]N[US] IB[ERN]IÆ. (Edward by the grace of God King of England and France, Lord of Ireland.)

On the *reverse* a conventional rose surrounded by four lions and ducal crowns, alternating with four lilies. The inscription on the outer circle reads: JHS. AUT[EM] TRANSIENS. PER. MEDIUM ILLOR[UM] IBAT. (But Jesus passing through the midst of them went His way.) St. Luke iv: 30. (Wiegleb, *Untersuch. Alchemie*. Weimar, 1777, p. 217.)

¹ Since my first paper on 'Alchemy and Numismatics' (*Amer. Journal of Numismatics*, XXI, p. 73), Mr. David L. Walker, one of the Vice Presidents of the American Numismatic and Archaeological Society, has contributed some notes on the subject, including a brief list of authorities. To this communication I am indebted for a few points.

In the preparation of this article, Mr. Lyman H. Low, of New York, granted me the use of his library, and made several bibliographical suggestions; his courtesy and kindness I thankfully acknowledge. The valued communication of Dr. Hans Riggauer, of Munich, I acknowledge elsewhere.