

Medieval Alchemy and the Philosopher's Stone
.... the story that Harry Potter DIDN'T tell...

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Welcome to the J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College Medieval Day presentation of: Medieval Alchemy and the Philosopher's Stone.... the story that Harry Potter DIDN'T tell...

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It seems as though that, throughout the ages, man's unquenchable thirst for knowledge, fame, fortune and eternal life have dominated the pages of most history books and manuscripts.

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And although innovation and creativity played an enormous role at times, there is much speculation about the motives, methods and logic behind the means

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..... And even *chemistry* is no stranger to man's quest for riches and immortality.

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Although they were **in** different eras and places, the ancient Chinese, Greeks, Egyptians and Arabs were like-minded in developing theories for the existence of chemical properties as demonstrated through their philosophies pertaining to the composition of nature.

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The Chinese essentially launched the concept of science with their belief that the universe was created from the forces of the Yin – thought to be manifested in darkness, coldness and wetness; and the Yang— thought to be manifested in light, heat and dryness; which together interacted to form the **essence** of all that was material.

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Thereafter, the Greek philosophers spent nearly 3 centuries speculating upon the universe and the substances therein as composed of 4 basic elements: earth, water, air and fire.

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This idea was fomented by Aristotle who even today influences our modern understanding of nature. However, it wasn't until the early middle ages in the lands of Egypt when the Arabs applied the concepts developed by the ancients using the basic tenets of chemistry.

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The Arab alchemist, **Abu Musa Jabir** Ibn Hayyan, suggested that these 4 basic elements combined to form sulfur and mercury. Alchemy as a pseudoscience was born through the works of Jabir and other early alchemists who believed that sulfur and mercury could then be combined to form lead and other non-precious metals.

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They believed that these non-precious metals could further be transmuted into gold and silver by the use of a magical potion known as the "al-iksir." The modern word "elixir" is derived from its ancient counterpart.....

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This potion came to be known as the "elixir of life" since it was believed to have miraculous healing powers..... AND to impart immortality!

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The premise of alchemy had not changed for nearly 10 centuries since the early alchemists, except that the "Great Work," as it was termed by the late medieval alchemists, was to produce the Philosopher's Stone from which the "elixir of life" could be made.

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One such alchemist in the 1500's—known commonly as Paracelsus—studied alchemy and medicine and was credited with introducing opium and mercury as medicinal agents. Paracelsus was less interested in transmuting lead into gold, and instead desired to discover cures for illnesses and diseases.

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And although he was dubbed as one of the great medical thinkers in the 16th century, Paracelsus was consumed with the notion of immortality and labored relentlessly in search of the mystical elixir of life. Ironically, before his death he claimed to have discovered the elixir of life and that he would live for eternity. However, this “oops” moment did not overshadow his outstanding medical legacy for diagnosing and curing a variety of ailments.

SLIDE 15 –Acknowledgements

I offer my thanks to the authors/contributors cited in this slidecast for allowing me to use their wonderful images. And a special thanks to Nancy Morrison, Reading Professor at JSRCC, for inviting me to present at this Medieval Day event.