

SIR ISAAC NEWTON - MYSTIC AND ALCHEMIST

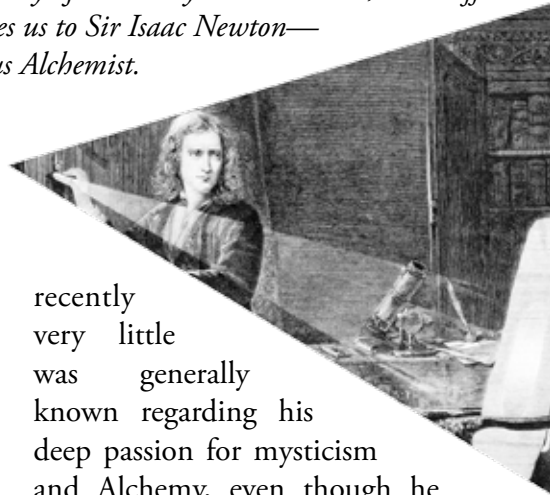
Staff of the Rosicrucian Research Library

Many people are familiar with Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727)—one of the most extraordinary scientists and mathematicians in the history of humanity. In this article, the Staff of the Rosicrucian Research Library introduces us to Sir Isaac Newton—passionate mystic and the world's most famous Alchemist.

Isaac Newton's amazing genius continues to significantly influence our lives today. His discoveries regarding the Laws of Motion and the Law of Universal Gravity literally changed the way humans view the world around us and formed the basis for modern physics. He built the first practical reflector telescope and using a prism, also proved that white light is made up of a spectrum of light (colors mixed together), rather than being a separate color itself, as previously believed. His *Method of Fluxions* became the foundation for differential calculus, which is applied extensively in many fields today, from designing factories to determining the rate of a chemical reaction.

Isaac Newton grew up on a farm in rural England. As a boy, he completely immersed himself in the study and application of a book entitled *The Mysteries of Nature and Art*, building various mechanical devices and discovering other ways to investigate the world around him. Later, when he was a student at the University of Cambridge, the Great Plague of London (1665-1667) broke out and all the students were sent home. Newton returned to the farm where he continued his passionate exploration of the natural world. This period of study and reflection and later time spent on his farm were immensely fruitful for Newton, providing insights into some of his most important discoveries.

While a great deal of information has been widely available regarding other aspects of Isaac Newton's life and work, until



recently very little was generally known regarding his deep passion for mysticism and Alchemy, even though he wrote more than one million words on the subject! Rosicrucians, however, have been aware of Sir Isaac Newton's mystical interests for centuries.

At the time of his death, Isaac Newton's personal library contained around 1,800 volumes, including 169 books on the topic of alchemy. His was considered one of the most important alchemical libraries in the world. His collection also included a thoroughly annotated personal copy of *The Fame and Confession of the Fraternity Rosie Cross*, by Thomas Vaughan—the English translation of the Rosicrucian Manifestos. He also possessed copies of *Themis Aurea* (*Themis Aurea: The Laws of the Fraternity of the Rosie Cross*) and *Symbola Aurea Mensae Duodecim Nationum*, important books related to Rosicrucianism, written by the Rosicrucian defender and Alchemist, Michael Maier. These books were all extensively annotated by Newton.

Isaac Newton chose to keep his mystical interests secret. There would have been many good reasons for doing so during the age in which he lived. At that time, the English Crown had outlawed

certain Alchemical practices, for example, creating gold through alchemical processes, because they feared that it might devalue the British currency. The penalty for this crime was death by hanging. Newton also faced certain scrutiny from his peers within the scientific community. Newton was repeatedly challenged throughout his lifetime regarding his theories and these confrontations deeply disturbed him.

Newton also felt that he was protecting humanity from those who might misuse alchemical knowledge. In a letter to fellow Alchemist Robert Boyle, one of the leading intellectual figures of the seventeenth century and largely regarded today as the first modern Chemist, Newton urged Boyle to keep “high silence” in discussing the principles of Alchemy publicly. He wrote that these principles “may possibly be an inlet to something more noble that is not to be communicated without immense damage to the world... There are other things besides the transmutation of metals which none but they [the Hermetic writers] understand.”¹

Even after his Alchemical manuscripts were discovered after his death, they were misunderstood. Although Newton served as the President of the Royal Society for twenty-four years, following his death in 1727, they decided that his papers on Alchemy were “not fit to be printed.” They remained largely unknown for the next 200 years.

Fortunately many of his previously unavailable manuscripts were donated to King’s College Library at the University of Cambridge in 1946, as a bequest from the British economist John Maynard Keynes, who had purchased them from one of Newton’s relatives in 1936. These texts include Newton’s extensive notes and diagrams related to his alchemical research and experiments over several decades. Many of them include alchemical code, such as alchemical symbols (for example,

☾, symbolizing silver, Monday, and the Moon), alchemical phrases (such as “the Green Lion,” which typically represents the essence of a metal or the raw forces of nature), and using ancient mythology to describe alchemical processes (for example, in the language of Alchemy, the deities Venus, Mars, and Vulcan represent copper, iron, and fire).

Jed Buchwald, with the California Institute of Technology, states, “There was a profound element to the practice of alchemy which really makes it deserving of being called early modern chemistry. Newton’s not a madman playing around with strange spirituous substances, he’s trying to actually figure out how to change material particles around to get one thing out of something else. And that’s not so weird.”²

In his text entitled, “Newton, the Man,” Keynes, a great admirer of Newton and well-acquainted with his work, states:

There are an unusual number of manuscripts of the early English alchemists in the libraries of Cambridge. It may be that there was some continuous esoteric tradition within the University which sprang into activity again in the twenty years from 1650 to 1670. At any rate, Newton was clearly an unbridled addict. It is this with which he occupied “about 6 weeks at spring and 6 at the fall when the fire in the laboratory scarcely went out” at the very years when he was composing the *Principia*—and about which he told Humphrey Newton [his assistant] not a word. Moreover, he was almost entirely concerned, not in serious experiment, but in trying to read the riddle of tradition, to find meaning in cryptic verses, to imitate the alleged but largely imaginary experiments of the initiates of past centuries.³

Michael White writes in *Isaac Newton, The Last Sorcerer*, “Like all European



alchemists from the Dark Ages to the beginning of the scientific era and beyond, Newton was motivated by a deep-rooted commitment to the notion that alchemical wisdom extended back to ancient times. The Hermetic tradition—the body of alchemical knowledge—was believed to have originated in the mists of time and to have been given to humanity through supernatural agents.”⁴

In “Newton’s Alchemy,” Karin Figala, writes, “His alchemy cannot be seen solely in connection with his chemical experiments but was also a link between his religious beliefs and his scientific aims.”⁵ Like the Pythagoreans more than two millennia before him, Newton studied how the universe worked in order to feel a closer connection with the Divine. Newton wrote, “The most beautiful system of the Sun, planets, and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being.”⁶ Dennis Hauck points out, “Newton was fascinated with light because he thought it embodied the Word of God, as suggested by the Emerald Tablet.”⁷



One of the most intriguing Alchemical texts found in Newton’s papers is his translation of the Emerald Tablet (*Tabula Smaragdina*). The oldest known version of this text, written in Arabic, dates to the sixth century. Rosicrucian Tradition attributes it to Apollonius of Tyana, a philosopher and thaumaturgist of the first century. In the earliest text, Apollonius

describes how he discovered the tomb of Hermes: “He claims to have found in this sepulcher an old man, seated on a throne, holding an emerald-colored tablet upon which appeared the text of the famed *Emerald Tablet*. Before him was a book explaining the secrets of the creation of beings and the knowledge of the causes for all things. This narrative would recur much later in the *Fama Fraternitatis*.”⁸

The text below is Isaac Newton, the Alchemist’s, commentary on the *Emerald Tablet*, translated here for the first time from Latin.⁹

Those things that follow are most true. Inferior and superior, fixed and volatile, sulphur and quicksilver have a similar nature and are one thing, as a husband and wife. For they differ from one another only by degree of digestion and maturity. Sulphur is mature quicksilver, and quicksilver is immature sulphur: and because of this affinity they unite like male and female, and they act on each other, and through that action they are mutually transmuted into each other and procreate a more noble offspring to accomplish the miracles of this one thing.

And just as all things were created from one Chaos by the design of one God, so in our art all things, that is, the four elements, are born from this one thing which is our Chaos, by the design of the Artificer and the skillful adaptation of things. And the generation of this is similar to the human, no less than from a father and mother, which are the Sun and the ☉.

And when through this intercourse a human child is born, it gestates in the womb of the dragon’s breath. In the leafy earth until the hour of its birth and after its birth it is nourished at the breast until it grows older. This breath is its bath. Of the Sun and the Moon... Mercury, ...the dragon and fire which succeeds in the third place to govern the Work. And the nurse is the purified Latona, who has

arrived and is cleansed until, on behalf of Apollo and Diana in Egypt, it has a nurse tintured white and red.

This Fountain of all perfection is the whole world. Its Power and Effectiveness is complete and perfect if it is changed into fixed earth by decoction and reddening and multiplication. But first it must gently and gradually be purified by separating the elements without violence, so that the whole matter ascends into heaven, and through repeated distillations descends to earth. Through which means it acquires both the penetrating power of spirit and the fixed power of a body.

In this way you will have the glory of the whole world and all darkness will flee from you, and all poverty and sickness. For this thing, when through dissolving and coagulation ascends to heaven and descends to earth, most powerful, evades all things. For it will overcome and coagulate every subtle thing and will penetrate every solid thing, and it moistens all.

And in whatsoever way the world has been made from the dark Chaos through the production of light and the separation of the waters of the firmament of the air from those of earth, so our work was created from the black Chaos and its prime matter through a separation of the elements and their illumination, and leads to the origin of matter.

Whereby arise adaptations and marvelous arrangements in our work, the mode of which is concealed within the creation of this world.

On account of this art Mercury is called thrice greatest, having three parts of the philosophy of the whole world, since he signifies the Mercury of the philosophers, which has and is made up of the three most powerful substances, body, soul, and spirit and has dominion in the mineral kingdom, the vegetable kingdom, and the animal kingdom.

Annotation: Avicenna, in his Tractates for Making Gold vol 1, p. 268.



Victoria Franck Wetsch, SRC, *As Above, So Below*.

ENDNOTES

1. Dennis William Hauck, "Isaac Newton, Newton the Alchemist," www.Alchemylab.com/isaac_newton.htm. Accessed May 19, 2013.
2. PBS, "Newton's Dark Secrets," 2005. www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/physics/newton-dark-secrets.html. Accessed May 19, 2013.
3. John Maynard Keynes, "Newton, the Man," Address before the Royal Society, 1946. www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/Extras/Keynes_Newton.html. Accessed May 19, 2013.
4. Michael White, *Isaac Newton: the Last Sorcerer* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1999), 117.
5. Karin Figala, "Newton's Alchemy," *The Cambridge Companion to Newton*, eds. I. Bernard Cohen and George Edwin Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 375.
6. PBS, "Newton's Dark Secrets."
7. Hauck, "Isaac Newton."
8. Christian Rebis, *Rosicrucian History and Mysteries* (Rosicrucian Order, AMORC: San Jose, CA, 2005), 12.
9. Isaac Newton, trans., "The Emerald Tablet of Hermes," B.J. Dobbs, "Newton's Commentary on the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus," I. Merkel and A.G. Debus, *Hermeticism and the Renaissance* (Folger: Washington, D.C., 1988), 183-4. <http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/newton/mss/dipl/ALCH00017>. Translation from Latin to English by Steven Armstrong, FRC.

