

'The practice of medieval and early modern alchemy'
23 July 2010: BSHS Annual Conference, Aberdeen

SHAC sponsored a themed panel on 'The Practice of Alchemy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe' at the British Society for the History of Science Annual Meeting, held in Aberdeen. This interdisciplinary panel included four presentations, each considering a different aspect of medieval and early-modern alchemical activity, and the challenge of reconstructing its practices from surviving evidence.

Jennifer Rampling (History and Philosophy of Science, Cambridge) began by introducing the problem of how to unearth practice from primarily textual sources, a difficulty faced not only by historians of science, medicine and technology, but also by the alchemists themselves. She explored some of the ways in which alchemical terminology changed over time, as successive readers attempted to reinterpret their encoded source materials in light of both practical experience and the close reading of texts. As a case study, she focused on fifteenth-century recipes using 'red lead', a term commonly interpreted as a code name for antimony ore by sixteenth-century practitioners. For instance, the *Vision* attributed to George Ripley was variously interpreted as an alchemico-medical recipe using red lead, and as an allegory for metallic transmutation using antimony.

The next two papers explored the operative dimensions of alchemy by focusing on its intersection with the related disciplines of metallurgy and medicine. Stephanie Seavers (History, UCL) spoke about the assaying techniques used to evaluate the outcomes of alchemical experiments. Medieval metalworkers knew that the external appearance of a metal could not always be relied upon, and therefore used assaying techniques as the only reliable method of establishing its composition. For alchemists, however, assay was necessary to show that transmuted gold was just as good as 'natural' metal. Seavers argued that, by claiming to change the internal properties of metals as well as their external appearance, alchemists challenged medieval notions of authenticity, which relied on a distinction between nature and artifice.

Anke Timmermann (English Language, University of Glasgow) spoke about alchemy and medicine. Alchemy had many applications in medical diagnosis and therapy, yet the influence of Paracelsus on chemical medicine from the late sixteenth century tends to distract scholarly attention from earlier engagements with alchemical medicine, witnessed in hundreds of anonymous manuscripts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These manuscripts point to the "everyday adaptation" of alchemical texts for medical purposes, yet information about their scribes and readers is scarce. Historians of alchemy must therefore consider alternative approaches to biographical and institutional histories when assessing the use of alchemy in medical practice.

Finally, Marcos Martín-Torres (Archaeology, UCL) revisited the question of sources by considering material evidence for a range of chemical practices, revealed using archaeological techniques. Reviewing the findings of recent excavations of early modern chemical laboratories, he sought to integrate these results with text-based studies (for instance, on early modern 'matter theories') by identifying common threads. Rather than focusing on alchemy simply as gold-making, Marcos discussed alchemy in relation to other important techniques, including the manufacture of brass (a 'new' metal which did not fit into existing schemes), and glass (a substance whose similarity to precious stones raised questions of authenticity). He argued that examination of such chemical activities, which were shared by a wide range of practitioners, enables historians to make connections between isolated case studies, and to identify broader themes in the history of alchemy and early chemistry.

The panel was chaired by Stephen Clucas (Birkbeck, University of London), who led a lively discussion, in which panellists responded to questions and comments from an

audience of historians of science, technology and medicine working on a very wide range of topics and periods.

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