



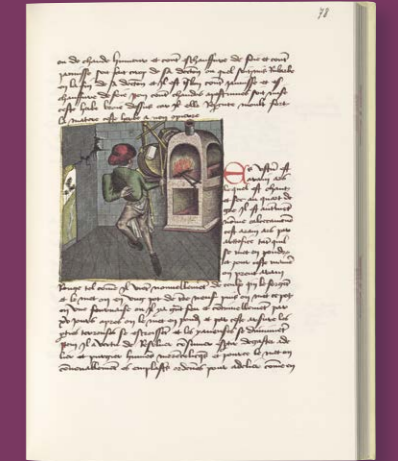
Plants and Prayers

Health and healing before 1700

Alchemy: The search for secrets

What does *alchemy* mean to you? Maybe the word conjures images of shadowy figures surrounded by smoke and mysterious vials. Or is it the search for gold (*transmutation*) or the philosopher's stone?

Alchemists appear across popular media in works from Harry Potter to medieval fantasy shows to board games. Alchemists were not the wizards of popular imagination; they were the scientists of their time. They explored the properties and applications of metals and other ingredients using the tools and wisdom available to them. Alchemy is considered to be the predecessor to modern chemistry. Many later medieval and early modern medicines used alchemical components, such as lead, arsenic, mercury, sulphur, copper and silver, mixed with plant products to treat all manner of illnesses. To modern eyes, it may be tempting to view alchemy as a dangerous prelude to more serious scientific experimentation, or as a practice replaced by modern chemical sciences. However, some scientists are exploring the therapeutic potential of the metals present in medieval infection remedies. Certain ingredients, such as silver and copper, are well-established antimicrobial agents. For instance, silver-soaked bandages are used in hospitals for non-healing wounds, and copper has been used in hospital surfaces as another line of defence against microbial contamination.



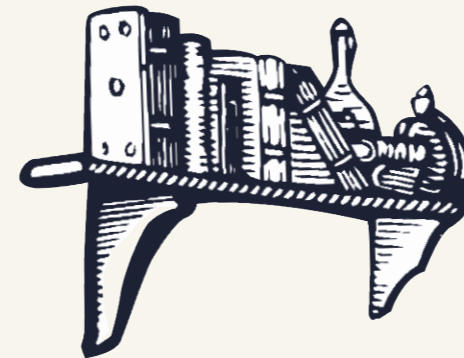
The calcination of copper at a furnace. Copper is associated with the planet Venus and frequently used in alchemical recipes. From *Livre des simples medecines*, a 15th-century French herbal, with introduction and adapted text by Carmélia Opsomer and translated by Enid Roberts and William T. Stearn (1984). Special Collection Oversize RS164 LIV

Tabula ad sciendam
dominam horarum

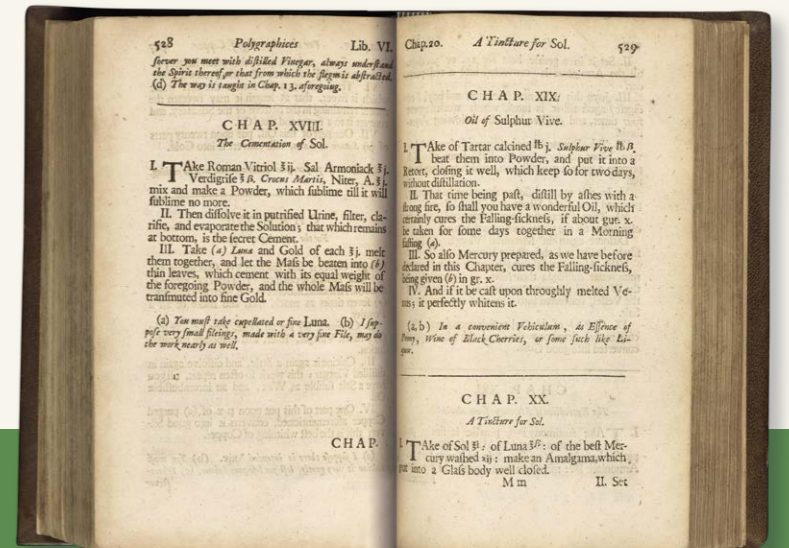
hora diei	Solus	Luna	Mars	Jupiter	Venus	
1. 15	h	o	♂	♀	4 ♀	
2. 16	h	♀	h	o	♂	♀
3. 17	♂	♀	4 ♀	h	o	♂
4. 18	o	♂	♀	4 ♀	h	o
5. 19	♀	h	o	♂	♀	4
6. 20	♀	4 ♀	h	o	♂	♀
7. 21	♂	♂	♀	4 ♀	h	o
8. 22	h	o	♂	♀	4 ♀	h
9. 23	4 ♀	h	o	♂	♀	4
10. 24	♂	♀	4 ♀	h	o	♂
11.	o	♂	♀	4 ♀	h	o
12.	♀	h	o	♂	♀	4
13.	♀	4 ♀	h	o	♂	♀
14.	♂	♂	♀	4 ♀	h	o

Luna Sol Luna Mars Jupiter Venus
Sol Luna Mars Jupiter Venus Saturnus

Alchemical table showing the planets with their proper metals, in the commonplace book of Denzil Holles (c.1558). Literary manuscripts in the Portland (Welbeck) Collection, Pw V 1/14



Bookshelf partial illustration from 'The Physician' from Hans Holbein's Dance of Death (originally from 1538). Central Store 2 N720.H6



The recipe on the left-hand page is for transmuting minerals (various copper and potassium compounds and iron oxides) into gold, and the one on the right is a cure for 'falling sickness', i.e. epilepsy. This book, *Polygraphice, or, The arts of drawing, engraving, etching, limning, painting, etc.* (1685) was doctor and author William Salmon's most commercially successful publication, but its popularity stemmed from its use as an art manual. Special Collection RS79 SAL