

Alchemical Symbols on Stećak Tombstones and their Meaning ("*Lapis Philosophorum*")

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Abstract

Stećak is the official name for approximately 70,000 mysterious medieval tombstones scattered across Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the border areas of Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia. To understand the meaning of the many symbols of alchemy and theurgy on the *stećak* tombstones, a researcher of medieval religions must relate to a world in which spirituality and Hermetic philosophy play a central role. In order to grasp the phenomenology of *stećci* (plural of *stećak*) in their total complexity, the symbols should be interpreted through philosophy (Neoplatonism), theology (Cataphatic and Apophatic theology), and the practices of alchemy and theurgy. For example, one recurring motif is the appearance of an unexpected third component in alchemical work. The alchemical imagination constantly reminds us that opposing forces in nature have to unite to form a special relationship, which through their unification, the “mysterious third” (Alchemical “Egg,” “Philosopher’s Stone,” “Tree of Life”) occurs that transcends ordinary existence. Without this kind of basic knowledge of the principles and philosophy of Neoplatonism and Hermeticism, it is very difficult to understand the symbols found on the tombstones. In the past, most Medieval scholars believed the *stećak* symbols were only decorative motifs and completely overlooked the deeper philosophical and spiritual content that was part of the Bosnian religious tradition at that time. The main goal of this paper is to provide readers with deeper insights on *stećci* as one of the most mysterious phenomena of Medieval Europe, and to reveal their spiritual and intellectual relationship with the practice of alchemy through interpretation of inscribed symbols on these tombstones and their connection with Neoplatonic and Hermetic philosophy.

Symboles alchimiques sur les pierres tombales bosniaques « Stećak » et leur signification (le « *Lapis Philosophorum* »)

Amer Dardağan

Résumé

Stećak (prononcé « *Stetchak* »), ainsi s’appelle chacune des quelques 70.000 mystérieuses pierres tombales médiévales, éparpillées à travers la Bosnie-Herzégovine et les zones frontalières en Croatie, Monténégro et Serbie. Pour comprendre le sens des nombreux symboles alchimiques et théurgiques inscrits sur une pierre tombale « *Stećak* », un chercheur des religions médiévales doit se plonger dans un univers dans lequel la spiritualité et la philosophie hermétique jouent un rôle central. Afin de saisir la phénoménologie des *Stećci* (« *Stetchji* », pluriel de *Stećak*) dans sa complexité, les symboles doivent être interprétés par la philosophie (le Néo-platonisme), la théologie (théologie cataphatique et apophatique), tout comme les pratiques alchimiques et théurgiques.

Par exemple, un motif récurrent est l'apparition d'un troisième composant inattendu dans l'œuvre alchimique. L'esprit alchimique nous rappelle sans cesse que les forces opposées de la nature doivent s'unir afin de pouvoir former une relation particulière, qui, par le biais de leur réunion, donne naissance à un « troisième mystérieux » (l'« Œuf alchimique », la « Pierre Philosophale », « l'Arbre de Vie ») qui transcende l'existence ordinaire. Sans ce genre de connaissance de base de ce principe, mais aussi du néoplatonisme et de l'hermétisme, il est très difficile de comprendre les symboles que l'on distingue sur ces pierres tombales.

Dans le passé, la plupart des médiévalistes croyait que les symboles des Stećak n'étaient autres que des motifs décoratifs, négligeant complètement le contenu philosophique et spirituel qui faisait pourtant partie de la tradition religieuse bosniaque de l'époque. L'objectif principal de cet article est de fournir aux lecteurs des notions plus approfondies sur les Stećci - l'un des phénomènes les plus mystérieux de l'Europe médiévale - et, grâce à l'interprétation des symboles inscrits sur ces pierres et leur connexion avec la philosophie néo-platonique et hermétique, de révéler leur relation spirituelle et intellectuelle avec la pratique de l'alchimie

Símbolos Alquímicos en Lápidas de Stećak y su Significado ("Lapis Philosophorum")

Amer Dardağan

Resumen

Stećak es el nombre oficial de aproximadamente 70.000 misteriosas lápidas medievales esparcidas por Bosnia y Herzegovina y las zonas fronterizas de Croacia, Montenegro y Serbia. Para comprender el significado de los muchos símbolos de la alquimia y la teúrgia en las lápidas de stećak, un investigador de las religiones medievales debe relacionarse con un mundo en el que la espiritualidad y la filosofía Hermética juegan un papel central. Para comprender la fenomenología de Stećci (plural de stećak) en su complejidad total, los símbolos deben interpretarse a través de la filosofía (Neoplatonismo), la teología (teología Catafática y Apofática) y las prácticas de la alquimia y la teúrgia. Por ejemplo, un motivo recurrente es la aparición de un tercer componente inesperado en el trabajo alquímico. La imaginación alquímica nos recuerda constantemente que las fuerzas opuestas en la naturaleza tienen que unirse para formar una relación especial, que a través de su unificación, se produce el "tercero misterioso" ("Huevo" Alquímico, "Piedra Filosofal", "Árbol de la Vida") que trasciende la existencia ordinaria. Sin este tipo de conocimiento básico de los principios y la filosofía del Neoplatonismo y el Hermetismo es muy difícil comprender los símbolos que se encuentran en las lápidas. En el pasado, la mayoría de los eruditos medievales creían que los símbolos del stećak eran solo motivos decorativos y por completo pasaban por alto el contenido filosófico y espiritual más profundo que formaba parte de la tradición religiosa Bosnia en ese momento. El objetivo principal de este artículo es proporcionar a los lectores conocimientos más profundos sobre stećci como uno de los fenómenos más misteriosos de la Europa Medieval y revelar su relación espiritual e intelectual con la práctica de la alquimia a través de la interpretación de los símbolos inscritos en estas lápidas y su conexión con la filosofía Neoplatónica y Hermética.

Símbolos Alquímicos em Lápides *Stećak* e seu Significado (“Lapis Philosophorum”)

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Resumo

Stećak é o nome oficial de aproximadamente 70.000 misteriosas lápides medievais espalhadas pela Bósnia e Herzegovina, e pelas áreas fronteiriças da Croácia, Montenegro e Sérvia. Para entender o significado dos muitos símbolos da alquimia e da teurgia nas lápides *stećak*, um pesquisador das religiões medievais deve se relacionar com um mundo no qual a espiritualidade e a filosofia Hermética desempenham um papel central. A fim de compreender a fenomenologia de *stećci* (plural de *stećak*) em sua complexidade total, os símbolos devem ser interpretados por meio da filosofia (Neoplatonismo), teologia (teologia catafática e apofática) e as práticas da alquimia e da teurgia. Por exemplo, um motivo recorrente é o aparecimento de um terceiro componente inesperado no trabalho alquímico. A imaginação alquímica nos lembra constantemente que forças opostas na natureza têm que se unir para formar uma relação especial, de cuja unificação decorre o “misterioso terceiro” (“Ovo” Alquímico, “Pedra Filosofal”, “Árvore da Vida”) que transcende a existência comum. Sem esse tipo de conhecimento básico dos princípios e da filosofia do Neoplatonismo e do Hermetismo, é muito difícil entender os símbolos encontrados nas lápides. No passado, a maioria dos estudiosos medievais acreditava que os símbolos de *stećak* eram apenas motivos decorativos e ignoravam completamente o conteúdo filosófico e espiritual mais profundo que fazia parte da tradição religiosa bósniaca naquela época. O objetivo principal deste artigo é fornecer aos leitores *insights* mais profundos sobre *stećci* como um dos fenômenos mais misteriosos da Europa Medieval e revelar sua relação espiritual e intelectual com a prática da alquimia, por meio da interpretação de símbolos inscritos nessas lápides e sua conexão com as filosofias Neoplatônica e Hermética.

Die Stećak Grabsteine: Alchemische Symbole und ihre Bedeutung ("Lapis Philosophorum")

Amer Dardağan

Zusammenfassung

Stećak ist die offizielle Bezeichnung für 70.000 geheimnisvolle mittelalterliche Grabsteine, die über Bosnien und Herzegowina, die Grenzgebiete von Kroatien, Montenegro und Serbien verteilt sind. Auf den *Stećak* Grabsteinen sind alchemistische und theurgische Symbole angebracht. Ein Forscher der mittelalterlichen Religionen, der eine Welt erfassen kann, wo Spiritualität und hermetische Philosophie eine zentrale Bedeutung haben, könnte sie verstehen. Um die Phänomenologie der *Stećci* (Plural von *stećak*) in ihrer ganzen Komplexität begreifen zu können, sollten ihre Symbole anhand der Philosophie (Neuplatonismus), der Theologie (kataphatische und apophatische Theologie), der Alchemie und der Theurgie erklärt werden. Zum Beispiel ist ein wiederkehrendes Motiv das Auftauchen eines unerwarteten dritten Elements gemäß der Alchemie. Die alchemistische Forschung erinnert uns ständig daran, dass die gegensätzlichen Kräfte der Natur sich in einer besonderen Verbindung vereinigen müssen, wobei durch ihre

Vereinigung der „geheimnisvolle Dritte“ (in der Alchemie „das Ei“, „der Stein der Weisen“, „der Lebensbaum“) in Erscheinung tritt und das einfache Leben transzendiert. Ohne diese Grundkenntnisse der Philosophie, des Neuplatonismus und der Hermetik ist es sehr schwer die Symbole dieser Grabsteine zu verstehen. Ein Großteil der Wissenschaftler des Mittelalters glaubte in der Vergangenheit, dass die stećak Symbole nur zur dekorativen Zwecke dienten. Sie übersahen gänzlich den tieferen philosophischen und spirituellen Inhalt, der damals ein Teil der bosnischen religiösen Tradition war. Diese Arbeit hat als Hauptanliegen, dem Leser tiefere Einblicke in den stećci, die zu den sehr rätselhaften Phänomene des mittelalterlichen Europas zählen, zu vermitteln und ihm ihre spirituellen und intellektuellen Beziehungen zur Alchemie anhand der Interpretation der eingravierten Symbole dieser Grabsteine und ihre Beziehung zur Neuplatonische und Hermetische Philosophie zu offenbaren.

Introduction

Stećci are medieval stone tombstones dating from the period between the twelfth to sixteenth centuries in the territory of the old Bosnian medieval state. Most of the tombstones are spread across Bosnia and Herzegovina; however, a small number of stećci can be found on the outskirts of today's neighboring countries of Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia. It is hard to determine the exact number of remaining stećci today. Recent research suggests that there are over 100,000 stećci; however, a large number were ruined in the past, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that the overall number of these tombstones was even larger.

Considering the high cost of the production, artistic engravings, inscriptions, and rich findings beneath stećci, most researchers agree that this burial tradition was strongly related to the social class of medieval noblemen and noblewomen, strongly influenced by the spiritual framework of the state-sponsored Bosnian Church. From the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, the Bosnian people showed great respect and admiration for the mysterious symbolic representations found on stećci, as their folk tradition preserved a mythical perception full of superstitions and fantasy tales. Many stećci necropolises were called *Divsko groblje* (Giant's cemetery) because they contained enormous tombstones sometimes weighing more than 30 tons,¹ and since these tombstones appeared to be very old in the eyes of the locals, in many cases stećci necropolises were called *Grčka groblja* (Greek cemeteries), alluding to the legend that "stećci were made by some Greeks who came long time ago and had to leave Bosnia after seven long years of harsh winter."²

There are different and still inconclusive theories on religious affiliation of people buried beneath stećci. However, since most medieval Bosnians were followers of the state-sponsored Bosnian Church, which had a dominant position in Bosnian society due to its special connection with the nobility, it is reasonable to assume that a special religious group called *kr'stjani*, with their unique views on spirituality based on Christian Mysticism, is closely associated with the stećci phenomenon in medieval Bosnia. Therefore, it is a known fact that the emergence of the first stećci tombstones and the first news about the occurrence of Bosnian "heresy" both date from the twelfth century and that stećci culminated in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when the Bosnian Church was at its peak. Additionally, there was a common practice among high

members of the Bosnian Church's hierarchy to be buried under *stećci*, and many of their tombstones contain symbols and inscriptions with a deeper mystical and esoteric meaning.³

Spiritual Alchemy: Symbols of Silver, Gold, and Lead

To begin, we should make a distinction between outward alchemy, which is manifested in visible practices of metal manipulation and an internal (real) alchemy, which represents a genuine link with the Soul and Spirit. The outward art of transmutation of metals into silver or gold drew many researchers away from the true meaning of alchemy. Transmutation of metals into gold is definitely not the real goal of alchemy, but the metallurgical symbolism is only closely connected with the inner aspect of alchemy.⁴

For alchemists, the universal principle of giving life within nature is Spirit, while the unique essence of each thing with the characteristics of receiving is Soul. These two principles together with the Body form the *tria prima*. Gold and silver are the reflection of the sun (the Spirit) and the moon (the Soul). However, priority should be given to spiritual realities, where gold and silver are seen only as manifested reflections. The alchemical craft makes sense only when it is used to serve spirituality by reflecting the true capabilities of the Spirit and the Soul.

Alchemical operations and procedures associated with metals are therefore only the external expression of the true art of transmutation of the constantly changing soul in the Lower world. Symbolically speaking, lead is a chaotic and sick state of metal and the inner man. On the other hand, gold reflects the perfected state of the existence of metal and of the archetypal human. Gold is therefore the real goal of alchemy, where all other states or other metals have only an indirect and a preparatory role in the process of attaining the original state of perfection. Among metals, gold is perfectly purified; among stones, the jewel; among flowers, the lotus; among birds, the eagle; and among all earthly creatures, the human.⁵ Among all of the symbols found on *stećci*, those of the sun and moon are most dominant and reflect the interesting inward relationship between Spirit and Soul (Fire and Water, Gold and Silver, King and Queen).

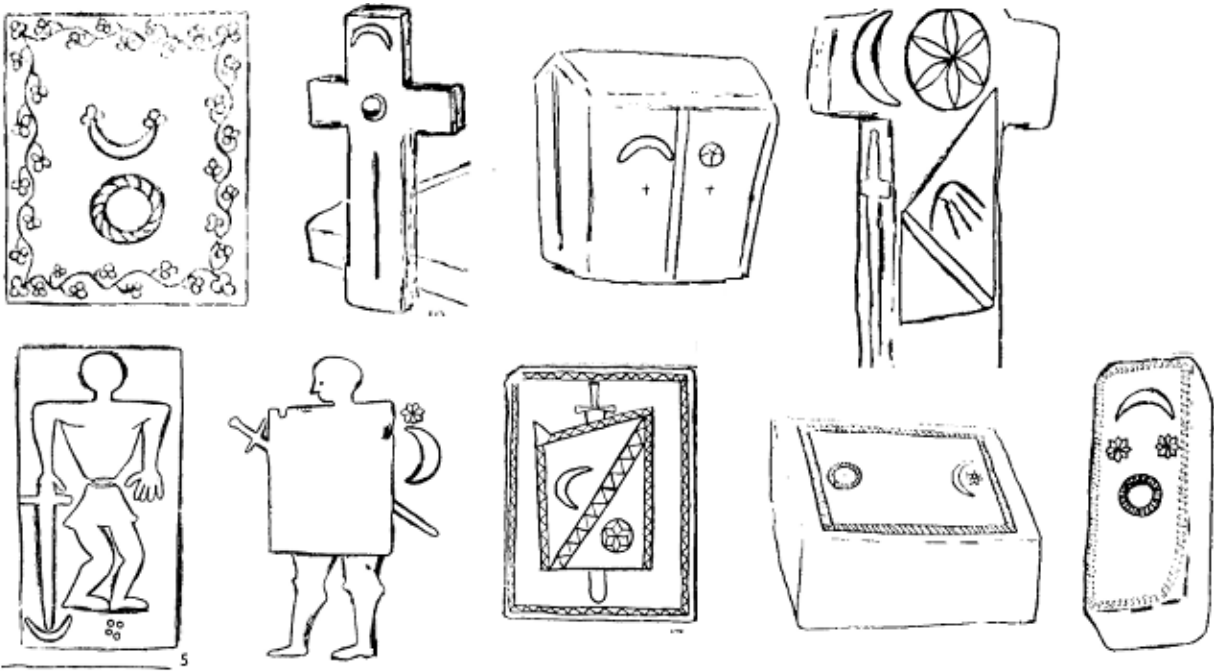


Figure 1. The sun and moon symbols are the most repetitive motifs found on stećci. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

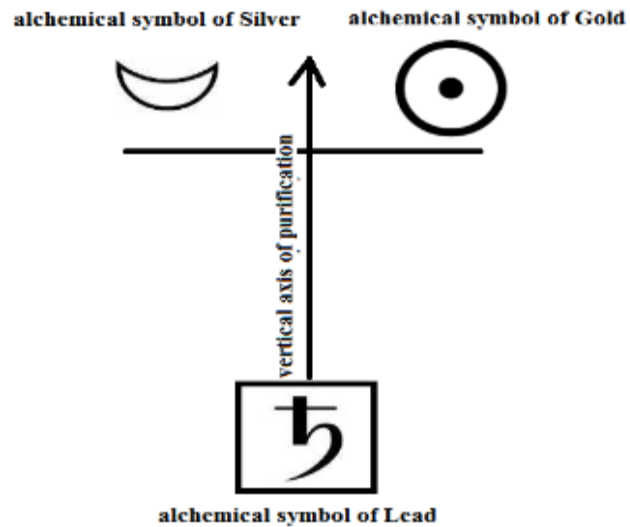


Figure 2. Medieval catacombs in the Bosnian royal city of Jajce contain alchemical symbols of Silver and Gold identical to those found on stećci. Images created by the author.

Hermetic and Neoplatonic Symbolism

Although alchemy is primarily associated with Hermeticism and Hermetic texts like the *Corpus Hermeticum*, it came to us in a purely Platonic form.⁶ Hermeticism is perceived as a continuation of Neoplatonism,⁷ and the name of Hermes Trismegistus, the personality which is the central figure of the mystical and alchemical way of thinking of the Middle Ages, was precisely given

by Neoplatonists.⁸ Hermeticism was one of the undercurrents of the cultural memory of the West, and though it was not mainstream, the Hermetic movement was never completely marginalized or forgotten. Florian Ebeling revealed that in the period of the Middle Ages (fifth to fifteenth centuries), the culture and philosophical traditions of Egypt had not been forgotten. On the contrary, Hermeticism revived and culminated in that period.⁹

Hermeticism spread in the Middle Ages through the works of the Church Fathers (primarily Christian Neoplatonists like Clement of Alexandria), the treatise "Asclepius" in the Latin translation, and the texts that have been translated from Arabic in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Mixing Hermeticism and Neoplatonism without a doubt originally took place in Alexandria,¹⁰ the city where scientific activity was at its peak through the work of many philosophical schools. From the Christian point of view, alchemy was a natural reflection of revealed truths in the Bible, and therefore it was firmly assimilated within certain Christian circles and communities who had a special view of the world based on philosophy. Much more easily, alchemy entered the Islamic world because Hermeticism was strongly linked with prophet Idris who is mentioned in the Qur'an.¹¹ It was the Platonic doctrine of "unity of existence" (*wahdat al-wujud*) that was the ideal tool for the esoteric interpretation of Islam through the mysticism of Sufism. Alchemy originally came to Europe through the Byzantine cultural influence and later through Islamic Spain, where it reached a climax.¹²

The most striking repetitive tendency found among stećci symbols is the Neoplatonic expression of undivided unity of existence, seen as an interrelated whole in which seemingly dissimilar things exist in qualitative correspondence and living sympathy. The influence of Christian Neoplatonic Mysticism of the medieval Bosnian Church toward the formulation of the esoteric ideas of unity with the Divine expressed through stećci symbols should not be underestimated.

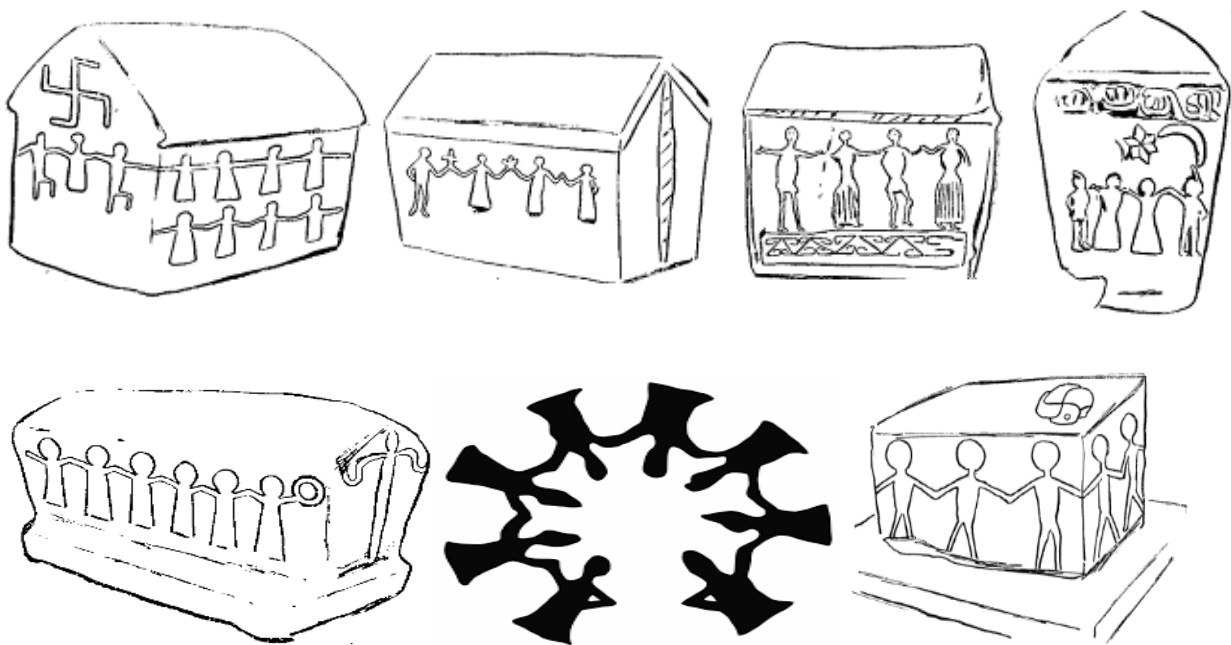


Figure 3. Many symbols on stećci share the idea of the unity of existence seen as an interrelated whole in which all living beings exist in qualitative correspondence and living sympathy. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

Alchemy and Mysticism

Alchemy can be closely compared with mysticism because both lead people to the knowledge of their own eternal being.¹³ The main goal of mysticism is union with the Divine (in the terminology of the medieval Bosnian Church: *kr'stjant*; *syn Christo*; "in Christ"), and alchemy represents a tool for achieving this goal through a return to the state of the original virtue of human nature and its true symbolism. In a spiritual sense, the transmutation of lead into gold is nothing but the attempt to regain the original virtue of human nature. When humans achieve this elevated purified state of virtue, everything in them becomes original, and their being is fully awakened and united with its source.

Alchemy may be regarded as a branch of mysticism.¹⁴ Alchemists therefore viewed the soul personality as a substance that must purify, dissolve, or crystallize. Alchemical cosmology creates an external reflection of the inner ontology of being. However, alchemy and mysticism could be considered in part rational interpretations of the world through logic, where there is no room for improvisation or some kind of irrational magic, since both are grounded in philosophy. Alchemical literature has suggestive language, rich in allegory and in alchemical images and symbols so that the real truth is hidden.¹⁵ The reason why alchemy and mysticism have often been kept secret and their knowledge passed down only orally and through symbols was the danger that the mystical community's teachings would be proclaimed as heresy and their practice labeled as magic and opportunism.¹⁶

Muslim alchemist Abu Musa Jabir ibn Hayyan, also known as the father of Arabic chemistry said:

I teach the art of alchemy in a way that nothing remains incomplete for one who listens and who is wise. On the other hand, the foolish and ignorant will not understand any of this. Therefore, alchemy is intended to teach the “wise” and deceive the “foolish.” The wise see the practice of alchemy from the spiritual “real” point of view, while the foolish are the ones who seek in it only worldly gratification like making gold for financial gain.¹⁷

Similarly, a Byzantine alchemist writes:

The philosophers have always talked in parables and symbols so that their doctrine would not be available to fools, because if that were to happen the craft would disappear. It should be accessible only by the patient and refined souls who withdrew from the corruption of the world and who purify themselves from the slimy dirt of greed.¹⁸

Symbols of the Microcosm and Macrocosm

In alchemy, we find the prevailing Platonic view that the universe (macrocosm) and the person (microcosm) correspond to one another as reflections, i.e. whatever is in one, there must be in the other also. This relationship can be expressed through a connection between object and subject, of what is known and the one who knows. For example, the universe is an object, or what is known, and the person is the one who knows. Both can be known only if we take into account their mutual connection. Of all creatures, human beings are the most perfect reflection of the universe, and therefore mirror or reflect back the entire universe to itself. Just as the "Cosmic Man" (Islamic Neoplatonism) consists of Intellect, Spirit, and Body, its reflection in the microcosmic individual human being contains Intellect, Soul, and Body as well. A person appears as a small universe within the larger one, just as the reflection does. This is portrayed on the *stećci* in Figure 4.



Figure 4. The relationship between Macrocosm and Microcosm on *stećci*. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

This connection is greatest through Intellect, where there is an obstacle in the sense that individual human intellect cannot comprehend the perfect unified Intellect Above at once, but only through Platonic archetypes or Forms in the world Below. Through the known axiom "As

Above, so Below," it is possible to explain the relationship between the symbols of the Upper and Lower Worlds, where what is Above has always been presented by unified symbols which are better because they are simple and "real," while Below there are complex symbols which are distorted reflections of the "real" symbols Above. The cosmos with its symbols is like a book of poetry that presents us with the task of discovering its meaning. Just as books of poetry often do not reveal their meaning before we invest a lot of effort and thinking, the universe does not reveal its symbolism if we do not invest a lot of attention and effort in order to discover its true meaning.



Figure 5. The unified simplicity of the Upper world Above depicted on stećci. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

Individual human beings can know the "real" Upper World only if they align their intellect at the same level as the Active Intellect.¹⁹ This can be done only if the human being turns away from the multiplicity and complexity of Below toward the united simplicity of Above; only then, can human intellect ascend toward the source of existence. This idea is grounded in Neoplatonic philosophy because it links cosmology with metaphysics. When Platonists look into space, they see the reflection of the eternal prototypes or Forms, which through various symbols induce a state of Platonic recollection in us because we saw the Forms in our symbolic beginning. Also, alchemists do not need to know all metals and their characteristics, but it is sufficient to know only their prototypes.²⁰

The Ptolemaic World as Symbolized by the Tombstones

The Ptolemaic world begins with Earth in the center, around which we have a multitude of planets under a sky of fixed stars. Different celestial spheres reflect the ontological order of the world, according to which each level of existence arises from the one that precedes it, so that each higher sphere contains a lower sphere, just as the cause contains the consequence.²¹ The ascent of the soul through the spheres is described as passing through a hierarchy of certain spiritual or intellectual levels, where after each spiral or ladder (Jacob's Ladder, Miraj of prophet Muhammad, "stations" in Sufism), the soul acquires a unique, better, and more direct vision of Heaven. This description is illustrated by medieval drawings on which the celestial spheres appear as concentric circles or ladders on which a person rises to the highest sphere.²² This

cosmological symbolic language can be found within all three monotheistic religions, and this was not in conflict with religious dogmas. Putting humans at the center of the universe gave humanity a certain cosmic dignity and the possibility of reaching a satisfactory spiritual vision that was equivalent to salvation. So, the saying of philosophers: "Know thyself" had not only individual, but also cosmic implications based on a cosmological view of the world. Through the imitation of the "Cosmic Person," the individual could achieve the internal mission of salvation of the soul.

Looking at the specific form of *stećci*, they can be imagined as a microcosmic diagram of the universe, where each of the planets along with its corresponding metals depict the alchemical path toward perfection of the Upper World.

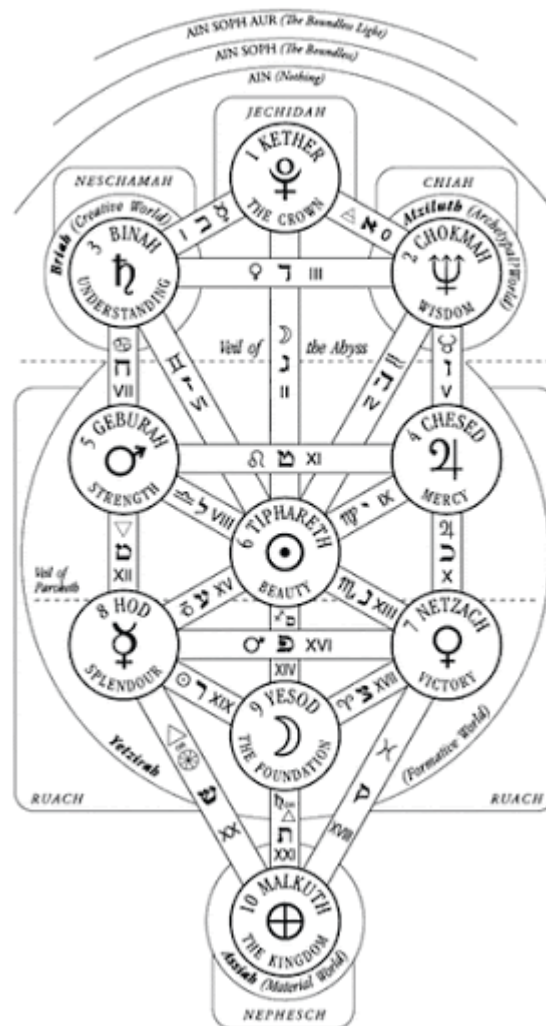


Figure 6. The shape of *stećci*, along with their mystical symbols, remind us very much of famous mystical diagrams of the "Philosopher's Stone" in alchemy, and the *Sephira* on the Tree of Life in Kabbalah, as seen in this figure. Image taken from *Book 4 by Frater Perdurabo and Soror Virakam*, by Aleister Crowley (Sangreal, 1972).

The Tripartite Unity or *Tria Prima*

Alchemists speak of the tripartite unity of human beings that corresponds to the Platonic division of the Divine into three hypostases.²³ The first and most important unity is that which arises directly from the Divine. Although this unity is within us, it is actually above us because Divinity is beyond all creation. The second unity that is present in humans comes from nature. It refers to the Intellect/Spirit from which all thoughts, will, and opportunities for spiritual activity emanates. The third unity refers to the Soul, where five senses engage the body and encourage all physical activities. The first and second unities are unchangeable, eternal, and simple because they belong to the Upper World (Intellect/Spirit), while the third unity in the Lower World (Soul, Body) is complex and constantly changing, and as such may be more or less like the Upper World.

The concept of unity was expressed on *stećci* mostly through symbols of the transformative state of merging with Christ, where the members of the Bosnian Church (*christiani - kr'stjani*) are immersed in Christ through mystical union.



Figure 7. Symbols of unification on *stećci* reflect the belief that the Divine is present in humans and that humans are immersed in the Divine. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

The Esoteric Symbolism of the “Vessel” and the “Contents”

The descent of the Divine into the material world is always referring to spiritual content which initiates or revives the bodily vessel. On the other hand, the ascent of spiritual content from the bodily vessel back to the Divine source can only happen through a suitable purification. By

acknowledging the inferiority of the human mind, an empty space is created in a mystic that is ready to receive the Divine's grace, and on stećci this is symbolically presented as an empty vessel which is now waiting to be filled with Divine light. According to Christian Neoplatonism, with the negation of all complexity in the material world, the soul becomes something like an empty vessel ready to accept the Divine's grace toward oneself, and that is primarily accomplished through the Christ Consciousness.

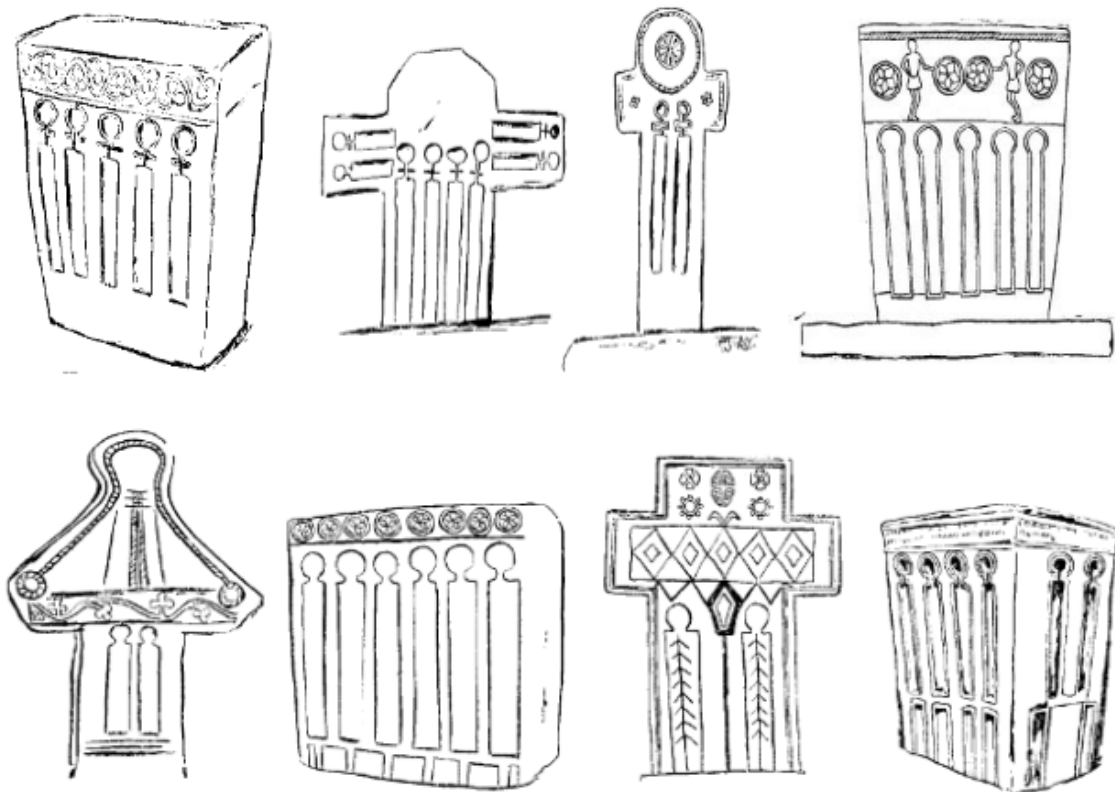


Figure 8. In order to know the Divine, we first have to accept that the Divine cannot be understood, after which the Divine's act of grace results in the discovery of the Divine's nature. On stećci sometimes this is implied with an imagery of the hermetic sealing of Divine content (light) in a vessel which is previously emptied (darkness) of everything irrelevant. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

Symbols of Sword and Shield

In alchemical terminology, metals are more or less like gold, i.e. they are a better or worse reflection of the Source. The purification of metals/the Soul and the return to the original state of purity are essential for union with the Divine. Namely, there has been some sort of separation of metals from the equilibrium of gold, so the Spirit (symbol of the sword) and the Soul (symbol of the shield) are separated, and it is necessary for them to reconnect to obtain a former full unity.

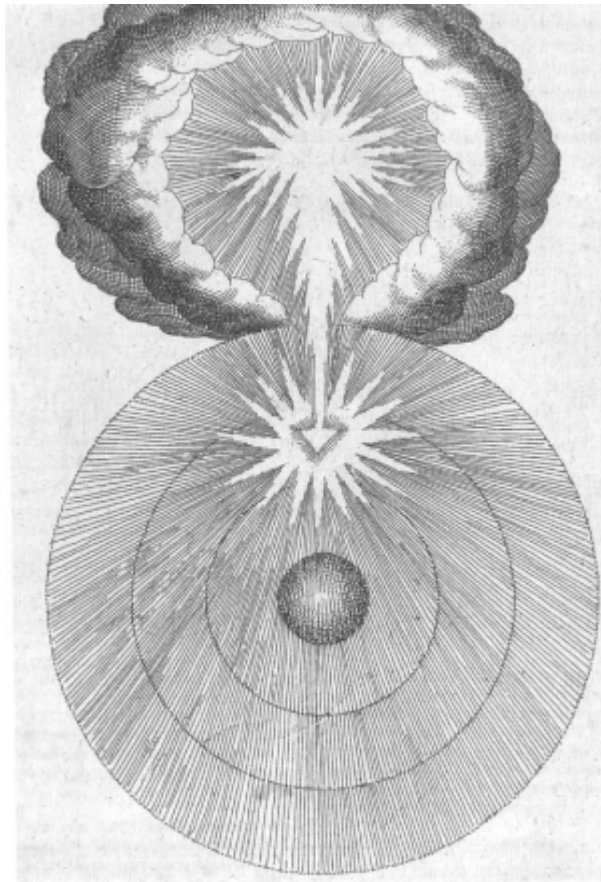


Figure 9. As seen above in his drawing, Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) presented the sun as the embodiment of the descending of the Divine's light, spiritual enlightenment, and physical warmth directed toward Below (symbolism of the blazing sword). Image taken from *Cloud Upon the Sanctuary*, by Karl Von Eckartshausen (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2009).

In other words, in the spiritual world there are only two properties: the attribute of receiving the light (the Soul, spiritual vessels, the shield), and the attribute of giving light (the Spirit, the sword). This alchemical doctrine is incorporated within Christian, Islamic, and Jewish mysticism and represents an integral part of each. We should not forget that the term "hermetically sealed" comes from the tradition of Hermeticism, which assumes that the vessel is able to seal things, so that the purity of the content is preserved in the best possible way.

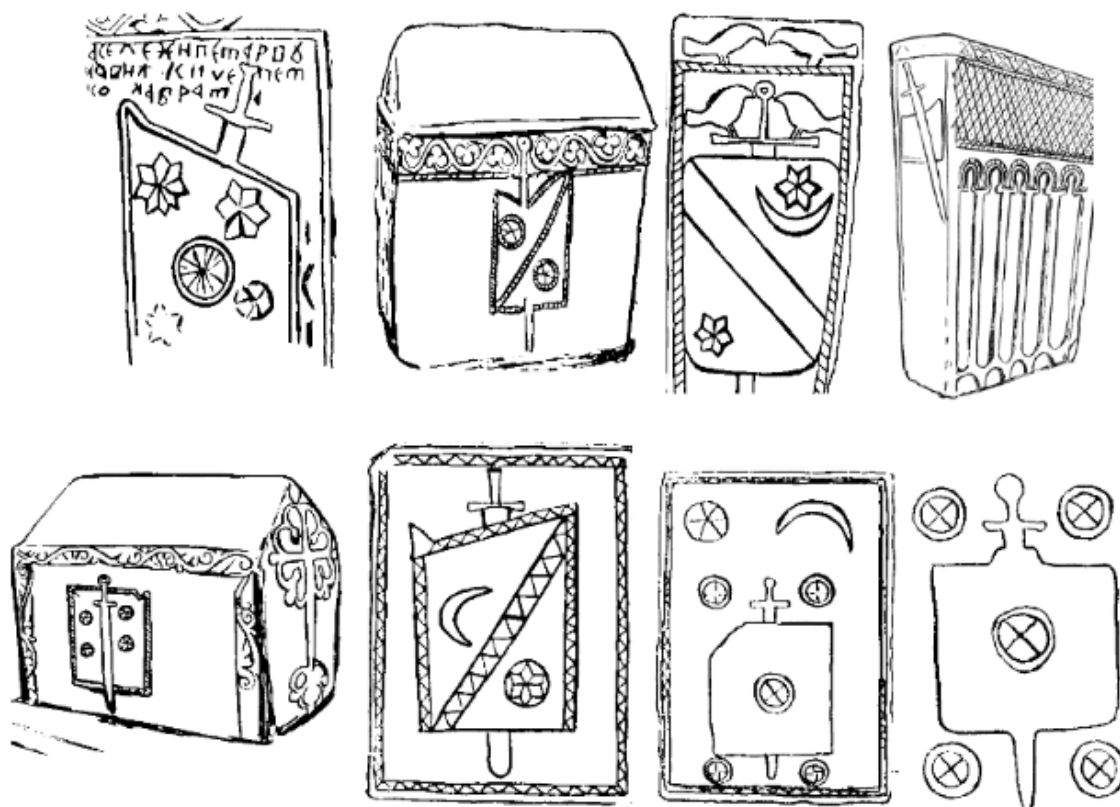


Figure 10. The tendency of the shield to receive passively, and the sword (a common symbol of Divine creation) to actively give, implies an interesting complementary relationship in mysticism clearly expressed on stećci. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

By understanding the mysterious dialectic of the Divine through negation and affirmation, the Divine can be symbolically represented at the same time as darkness and illumination. This interesting relationship between *reditus* (negation; concealment; the shield), and *procession* (affirmation, Revealment, the sword) can also be presented through interaction and interrelation of the hands in terms of receiving/ascent directed inwardly (potential) and giving/descent directed outwardly (manifestation).

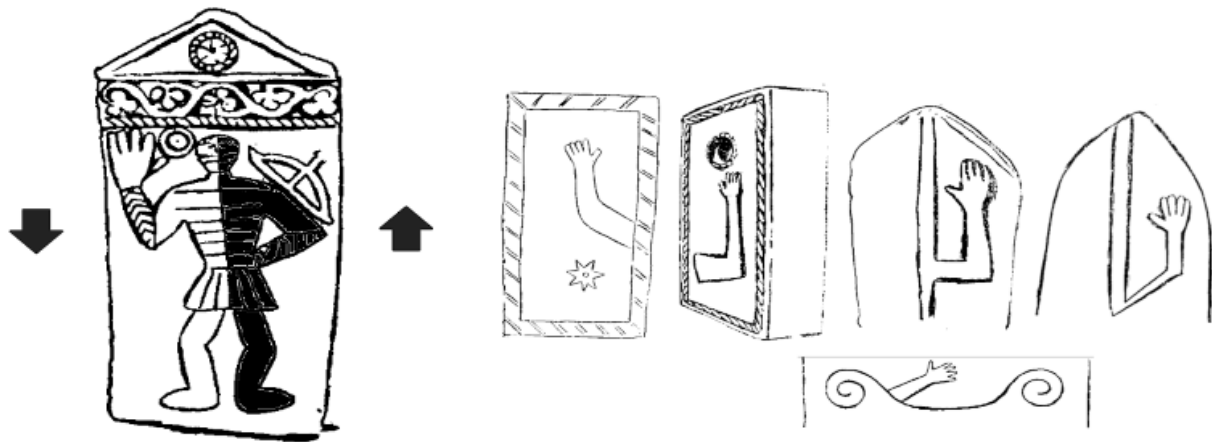


Figure 11. These drawings show interesting imagery on stećci where the left hand is hidden behind or inwards, and implies concealment, contemplation, potential, or limitation (Apophatic theology); and the right hand is stretched out, implying revealment, grace, manifestation, or unlimited expansion (Cataphatic theology). Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

Symbols of the Four Elements

For the alchemists, knowledge of the four elements (Earth, Water, Air, and Fire) was of great importance. It served them as qualitative essences of quantitative matter in relation to hot, cold, wet, and dry, which are also the basic methods of the elements in action.²⁴ The work of the alchemist is based on the rotation of elements, the permanent movement from one state of nature to another. The four elements correspond to the spiritual domain of the Soul with four qualities: expansion, contraction, dissolution, and solidification.²⁵

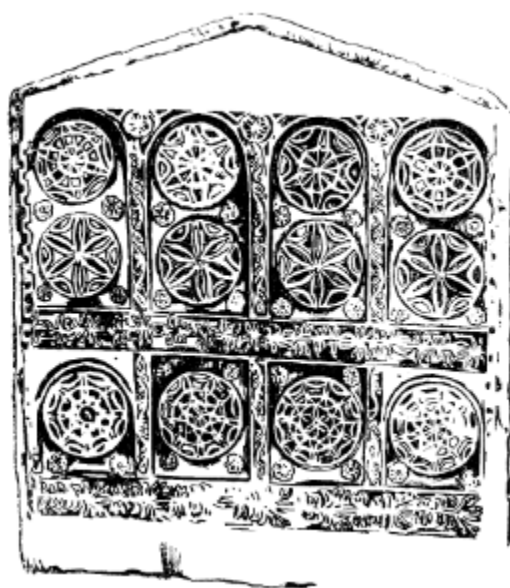


Figure 12. The Rotation of Elements portrayed on a Zgošća stećak. Illustration taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

The trajectory of the sun going in the direction of the cross and passing through the four cardinal points (north-south, east-west) reflects the four elements and their characteristics. However, it should be noted that the faithful alchemist did not view the four elements as tangible bodily qualitative substances in today's modern sense, but more in the sense of spiritual quantitative archetypes that are immaterial. According to Western and Eastern alchemists, elements are never to be found in the bodies in their original form. Every physical substance contains all four elements simultaneously, so for example material water is not identical with the element of water, but it is a manifestation of this element to the fullest extent.

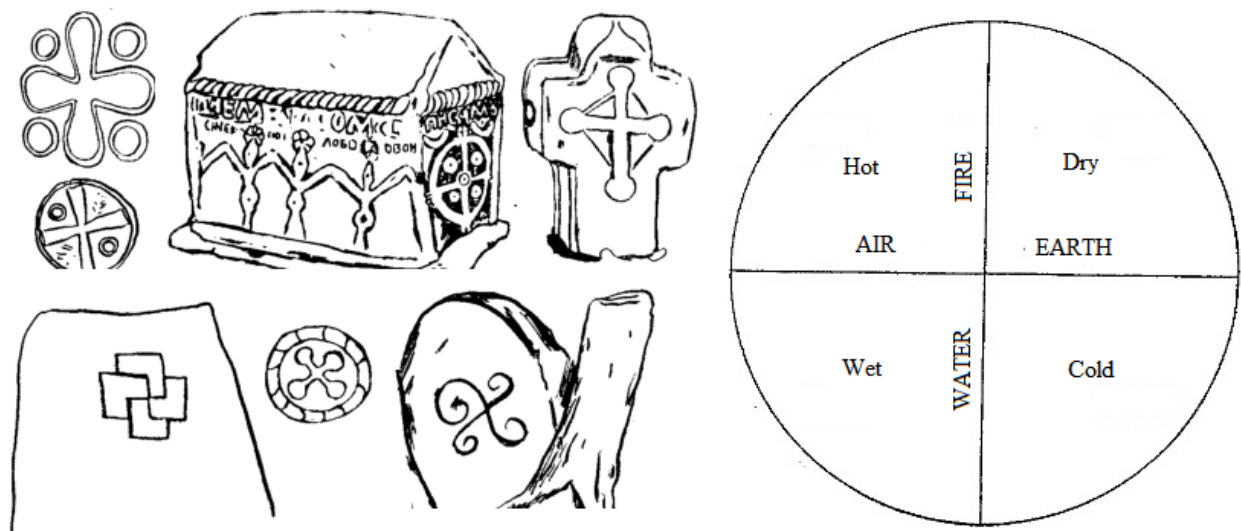
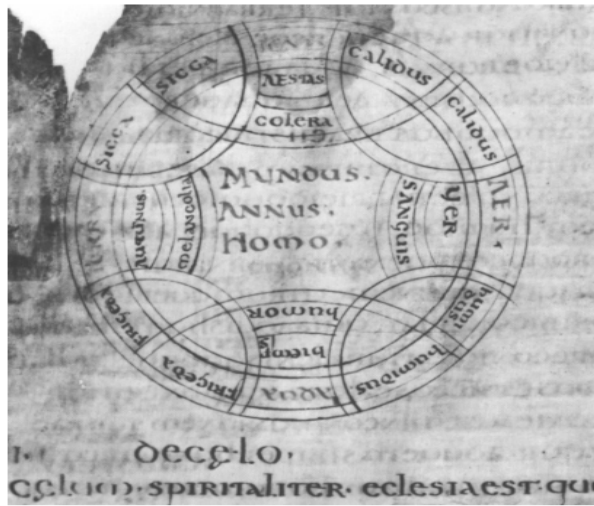
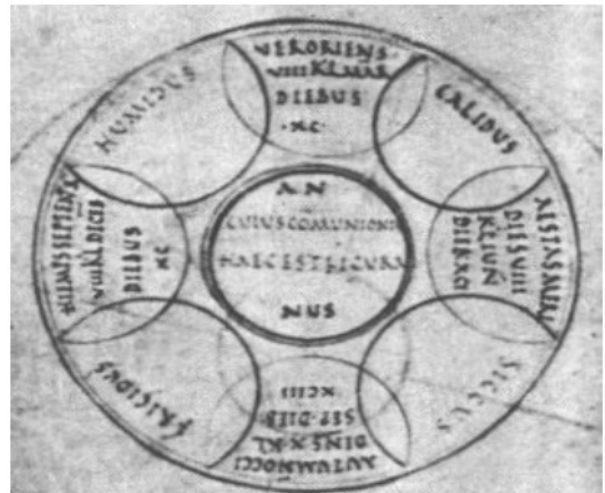


Figure 13. These are a few examples of the four elements imagery found on stećci. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

A Platonic and Aristotelian mindset permeated the Middle Ages (fifth to fifteenth centuries). Particularly significant was Aristotle's theory of elements, wherein each of the four elements comprised the two circles with two suitable qualities.²⁶ The figure of the circle was a suitable way to express the concept of harmony and equilibrium, as well as the concept of contraposition and dichotomy within the circle. Inspired by Aristotle's theory of the elements, in the Middle Ages there was a so-called *Mundus-Annus-Homo* figure in which a series of paired qualities suggest cyclic movement, harmony, and balance, but also the concept of contraposition inside the circle reflecting their important role on the microcosmic and the macrocosmic level.²⁷ The *Mundus-Annus-Homo* figure can be found in the Isidore of Seville, *De natura rerum* ("On the Nature of Things") and in the works of Boethius, but it seems that both authors drew this figure from the Christian Neoplatonist Ambrose. The oldest diagram of this type dates from the mid-eighth to eleventh centuries where the system of connected circles on the diagram expresses a harmonious cycle of four elements with associated qualities, seasons, and bodily fluids.



World (Mundus)	Year (Annus)	Human being (Homo)
dry and hot, fire	Summer	yellow bile
hot and humid, air	Spring	blood
humid and cold, water	Winter	phlegm
Cold and dry, earth	Autumn	melancholy.



Year
Spring, humid and warm: Occident
Summer, warm and dry: South
Autumn, dry and cold: Orient
Winter, cold and humid: North.

Figures 14 and 15. *Mundus-Annus-Homo* figure; *Annus* figure. Images taken from *De natura rerum*, by Isidor of Seville (Paris, *Bibliothèque nationale*, lat. 6413, f. 5v).

The four elements are written on the outer edge of the circle according to its specific position: Fire (up), Water (bottom), Earth (left), and Air (right).²⁸ It should be noted that the position of elements within the circle should not be considered strictly geographically, but more like one harmonious conceptual design. Qualities which are inscribed in semi-circles represent, in a very interesting way, the figure of a cross. The element of fire has appropriate qualities: dry and hot. At the same time, the Fire element is connected with the Air through the quality of heat, and also Air contains the wet quality which is shared with the Water element. Water here also contains a cold quality which is shared with the Earth element. The Earth is cold and dry, and with the quality of dryness, this cycle is finished. Inside the semicircle of each element we find four seasons: Fire refers to summer; Earth refers to fall; Water to winter; and Air to spring. Below the seasons section, the human fluids are listed. Thus, *cholera* (bile) refers to the element of Fire and summer; *sanguis* (blood) with Air and spring; *mucus* (phlegm) with Water and winter; and finally, *melancholy* refers to the Earth and autumn. We conclude that the three units of the circle – Mundus, Annus, Homo – are the final results of the characteristics and qualities of the seasons and fluids in the human body. We can find Mundus-Annus-Homo diagrams in their independent variants also, so now we will turn our attention to one of them: the Annus figure. The figure shows the seasons, qualities of the elements and the four sides of the world.

The seasons are united by natural ties. Indeed, the spring consists of moisture and fire, the summer of heat and dryness, the fall of dryness and cold, and the winter of cold and humidity. As a consequence, the seasons are as they are because of their mix of common bonds, as presented in the figure.²⁹

According to the tradition of alchemy, the natural order of the elements is presented in two ways. The first way is through the cross where in the center there is the fifth element (*Quinta Essentia*) surrounded by four elements.³⁰ However, the second way is through the symbolism of triangles. The triangle that is pointing upwards refers to the Fire (seed), while the inverted triangle pointing down is related to Water (branches). The many differentiated and creative aspects of the cosmos with the symbol of the triangle directed toward the Below (reverse triangle) are depicted with a very frequent representation of vines or grapes ascending from a reversed triangle. On the other hand, the undifferentiated male aspect is a reversion or a return to the Upper World, and it is represented by an upright triangle directed toward the Above (seed) and is closely related to humankind's exit from the "cave." Turning and transformation from a creative aspect directed toward Below to spiritual reversion or return to the Above is one of the most prominent features of the stećci symbolism (see Figure 16). It is often characterized by an acanthus motif, which has an extraordinarily significant and important role in the religious symbolism of Greek and Romanesque art. It refers to a life that escapes from the grave, not as a purely Christian concept of resurrection, but as a Platonic symbol that suggests the cyclical nature of life. In Mediterranean cultures, this plant symbolized immortality and victory, but in later Christian settings, the plant's shape was a clear allusion to pain, suffering and the need for spiritual transformation of the person through purification before ascending to Heaven. In almost all depictions, the acanthus leaves are transformed into grape vines and grapes, indicating a transition from the state of mortality to immortality after spiritual cleansing.

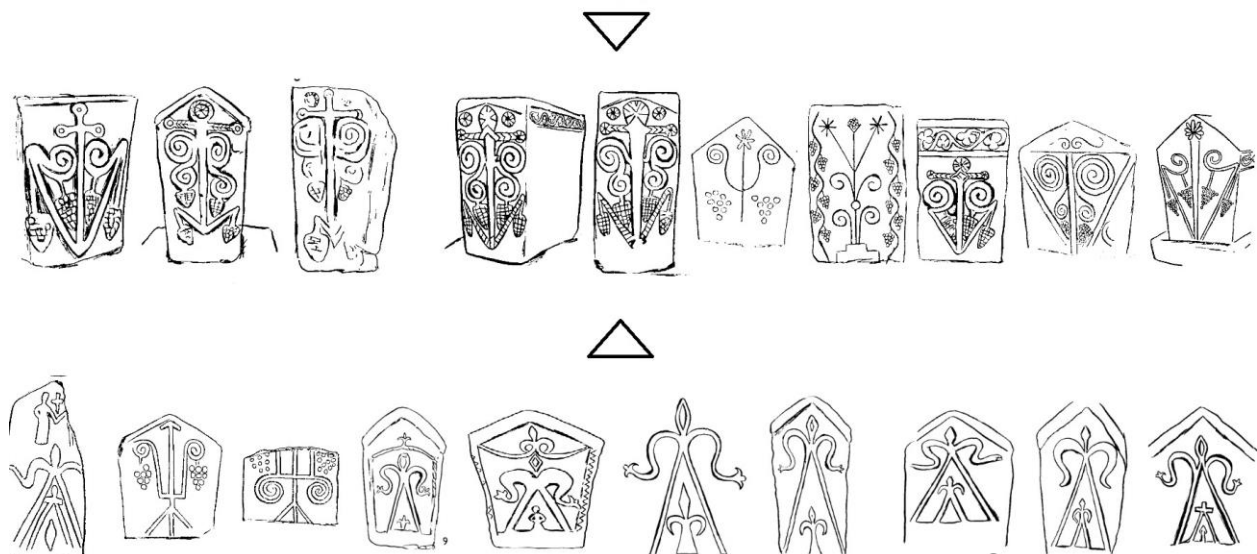


Figure 16. The natural alchemical order of the elements presented through the symbolism of triangles is a common pattern found on stećci. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

Elements acquire a degree of complexity in the realm of the Soul, but they act primarily in relation to the two tendencies: moving downward *AB UNO* (Water, Earth), and moving upward *AD UNUM* (Air, Fire). So, here we have a contrast between Water and Fire, because their tendencies and movements are opposed. The same is true regarding the relationship between

Mercury and Sulphur in alchemy (female-male). In general alchemical terms, by connecting these opposites, the Soul becomes "liquid fire" and "fire water," where two principles become the all-determining poles of existence, i.e. they are like the two hands of the Divine – male-female, father-mother – and they cannot be separated from each other.³¹ See Figure 17.

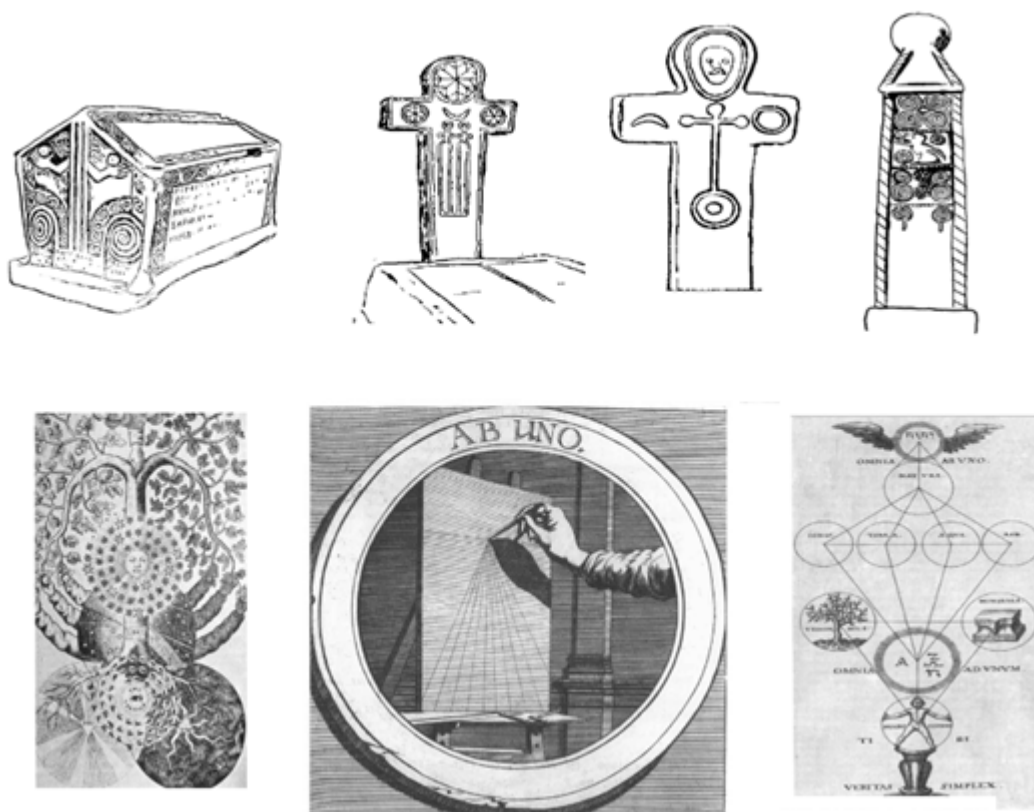


Figure 17. The relationship between macrocosm and microcosm: *Omnia ab Uno* (All from the One/the Divine) and *Omnia ad Unum* (all to the One/the Divine).³² First row: Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968). Second row: Images taken from *Kabbalistic Visions: C.G. Jung and Jewish Mysticism*, by Sanfrod Drob (Spring Journal, Inc, 2009).

The alchemists often use the same symbols for the metals and the planets, depicting the relationship between alchemy and astrology in relation to the famous premise, "As Above, so Below." If we know that being comes from the prima materia, which is symbolically manifested with four fundamental elements (Fire, Air, Water, Earth), then we can also say that metals are "the fruit" of these elemental substances. Alchemy teaches us that the metals that we find in the depths of the Earth are formed under the influence of the seven planets: the sun, the moon, and the five planets visible to the naked eye. All metals can be divided into two groups reflecting the relationship of gold and silver, where gold is the incarnation of the generative pole of existence, while silver is a reflection of the reversible pole of existence. So, Mercury represents the female aspect of creation, while Sulphur is its opposite and represents the masculine aspect.

Therefore, all other metals participate in various degrees within these two poles of existence; thus none of the metals belong exclusively to one or the other, but are instead in a state of mixture. Thus, for example, the symbol of a cross in alchemy is represented by four elements or four directions of movement in space.³³ According to the alchemists, metals can be transmuted into silver and gold, only if they are previously reduced to a state of prima materia. For alchemy, prima materia is of crucial importance because it is the key ingredient or "elixir" for making gold. This is also true for the Soul, because the prima materia is the fundamental substance of the Soul, and it is the source of all manifested symbols. Alchemists see the prima materia as the primary substance of life and creation. It is the basic substance of the Soul and the "fullness of all creation," and it is symbolically represented as a grape vine and clusters, which are symbols of abundance and life.

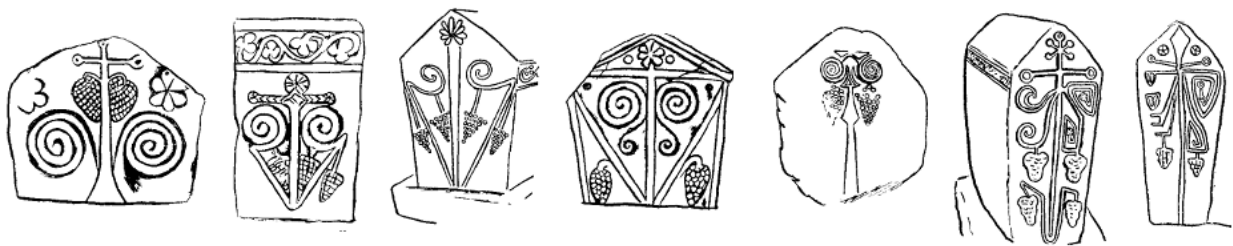


Figure 18. Alchemical prima materia are symbolically represented on tombstones as a grape vine. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

The prima materia is represented symbolically also as a hook that has the role to connect and to attract the male and female aspect of creation. Within the language of the Bible, the prima materia is represented as the waters at the beginning of creation.³⁴ Although prima materia refers to the source of being, it is primarily considered to be a mysterious chaotic source material that contains opposites that are in violent conflict.³⁵

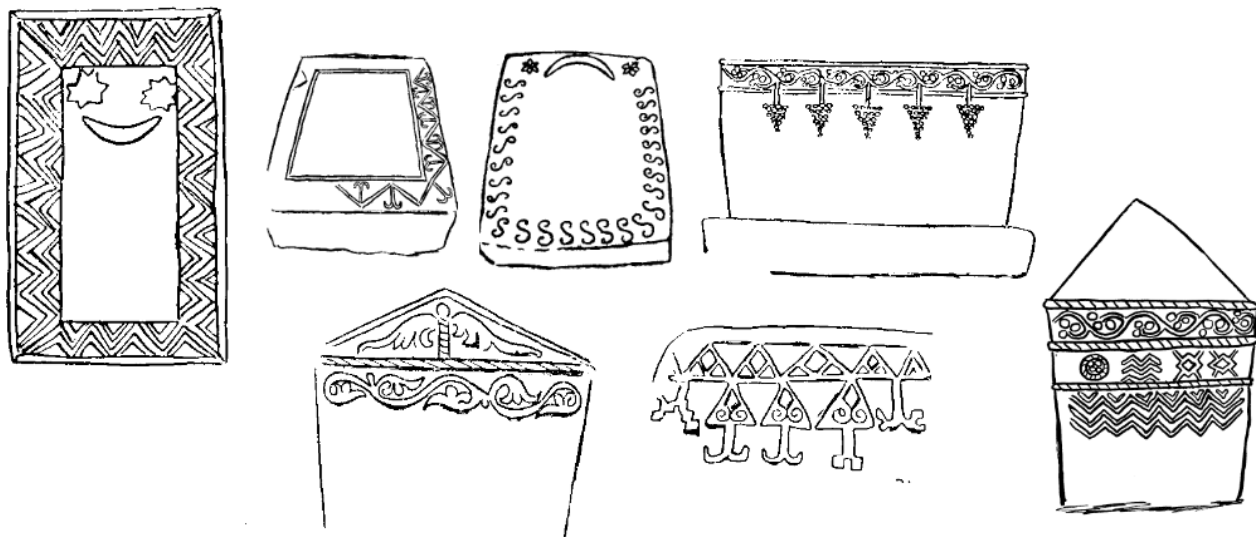


Figure 19. Prima materia is portrayed on stećci as the primary substance of life and creation. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).



Figure 20. The prima materia is portrayed on stećci as opposites in violent conflict. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

Thus, considering that the prima materia is in all created things and that it also contains all things, we call it "the black sea." Alchemists also called it "the earth," "the virgin" of great purity and receptivity, and thus a very significant symbol of the prima materia is the "Tree of Life" and "Alchemical Egg."³⁶ On the "Tree of Life" we find the sun, the moon, and the planets, or all of the different stages of the alchemical process with their symbolic colors: black (*Negredo, melanosis*), white (*Albedo, leukosis*), yellow (*Citrinitas*),³⁷ and red (*Rubedo, iosis*).³⁸ The symbolism of color was very important in alchemy as the change in color represented the successive transformation of matter (transmutation)³⁹ and movement from one level of existence to another. Negredo as the initial phase of the alchemical process marked the death or destruction of the original form (*prima materia*) to form the chaos, suffering, or pain. In other words, the black phase includes the beginning of the spiritual process of ascent, which must first come with the abandonment of all old habits, relationships, and dependencies of the material world outside. Only then the purified soul becomes free to reunite with the rejuvenated prima materia to the white or albedo phase, which itself is highly rewarding. If the black phase symbolizes a painful and sobering turning back/inside and can be represented as night, then the white phase symbolizes the refreshing and youthful condition of moving forward/outside and can be represented as the sunrise. Finally, the third red phase is named that way because of the amount of fire which contains the Spirit or Intellect. In this phase the male principle of the Upper World is reunited with the female principle or purified Soul in the Lower World. Spirit or the "Red King" merges with the Soul or the "White Queen," thus creating a "Mystical Fruit," "Alchemical Egg," "Philosopher's Stone" (*Lapis Philosophorum*), or "Tree of Life."



Figure 21. A medieval stone chair near a stećci necropolis depicts the Tree of Life inscribed with symbols of the Red King and White Queen. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

The Peacock's Tail

The end of the alchemical process is represented by the symbolism of the peacock's tail. The peacock's tail (*Cauda Pavonis*) represents the three stages of the alchemical process through changes in tail color: black, white, and finally bright red. Mostly, this symbolism describes the totality of all colors within white light, or a reflection of the alchemical quest for unity that is expressed in white light. Specifically, the colorful richness and diversity of the peacock's tail reflects the brilliance of the white color that symbolizes eternity. The peacock's tail is also an inspiration and promise of the afterlife, drawing attention to the wealth, beauty, and goodness of Divinity. The totality of the alchemical process expressed by the peacock's tail is also identical to the *Ouroboros* symbolism where a snake is eating its own tail, thus symbolizing the eternal unity of all things and the perpetual cyclical renewal of life indicating the movement toward immortality, as expressed in the tombstone in Figure 22 below.



Figure 22. A peacock tail and Ouroboros are seen as depicted on tombstones. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

Prima Materia as Barrier or Bridge

The four elements are the manifestation of four fundamental determinations of the prima materia explained through the symbolism of the alchemical cross. At the beginning of every spiritual realization, or the alchemical phase, there is a "material death" that is male in character, where we have a turning from the changing world (female concept of material life) to the eternal inner world (male concept of spiritual eternity).⁴⁰ This is expressed in a very poetic way by the scribe of Bosnian Ban Stephen II: "The Earth is mother to me, and my patrimony is my grave. From the Earth we come and in the Earth we go."⁴¹

The prima materia can be primarily seen as an abyss that separates the Upper and Lower Worlds. It can be seen either as a barrier between the two worlds or the bridge that connects it. The barrier symbolized by the prima materia refers to the destroying of the material ego, the abandonment of individuality, and going toward unification with the Upper World. The experience of crossing the abyss is characterized with the symbolism of sailing over unknown waters, where the Lower World we know is left behind us, so that an unknown journey begins toward the Upper World. In other words, persons cannot pass the abyss as long as they are attached to the material world and daily experiences related to their ego. Therefore, this transition is conditioned by a mystical experience of crossing the bridge.

Alchemy is an imitation of nature, and the rhythm of nature is impersonal and infinite. Universal nature has two directions of movement: one that gravitates from the spiritual center to the multiplicity, and the other that gravitates from the multiplicity toward the spiritual center. Nature therefore has two modes of action that are reflected in the rhythm of continuous disintegrations and integrations, where any kind of disintegration is nothing other than preparation for a new conjunction of Form and Matter.⁴² Here are two forces: love and conflict. They correspond to two alchemical processes of dissolution and coagulation. The culmination of the alchemical process is achieved when the female and male principles are united together. As seen in Figure 21, the result of the marriage between Fiery Spirit (the Father) and Watery Materia (the Mother) is the mystical third portrayed in the form of the alchemical Philosopher's Stone or Alchemical Egg.⁴³

Western alchemy generally uses the language of Platonic metaphysics in which nature is perceived through the philosophy of Plotinus, where nature refers to the female creative aspect of the prima materia. Ibn Arabi, one of the greatest scholars of Islamic mysticism and alchemy, looked at nature as a female aspect of the creative act of the Divine's "grace" or "giving."⁴⁴ According to Arabi, grace or creation is a delightful work, because all things are longing for their full manifestation, although the author admits that this grace or creation of multiplicity still refers to separation from the Divine because of its downward direction. This feminine creative divine energy is like a spring of nature where the manifested existence is understood as a divine gift.⁴⁵ Feminine energy drives the soul out of its sterile existence and is the source of all the longing, but also of all the potential in people.

Sulphur (Intellect/the Spirit) as a male energy and Mercury (Universal nature/the Soul) as a female energy want to unite because their prototype in the Upper World is the One/the Divine. Precisely from this aspiration comes the marriage between husband and wife, Sulphur and Mercury, the Sun and the Moon, the Intellect and the Soul. From this perfect union on the

alchemical level gold is formed, and alchemical processes are nothing more than "assistants" helping to attain this goal, the state of pure and perfect essence. Ibn Arabi wrote about gold as a symbol of the original and purest state of the Soul in its innocent form as it was at the very beginning. According to Islamic Neoplatonism, this state of the Soul could be found in every child before it unconsciously lost its purity by adulthood.⁴⁶



Figure 23. *Prima Materia* is portrayed as a river passing between two conjoined principles of the Sun (reflected by the alchemical symbol of Sulphur) and the Moon (reflected by the alchemical symbol of Mercury). Illustration taken from *Elementa Chymiae*, by Johann Conrad Barchusen (1718).

The Intellect as a hypostasis of the Upper World is symbolically represented by the fixed vertical axis (the sword), while the Soul (Universal nature) as a hypostasis of the Lower World is represented by a spiral (the shield) that goes around the axis so that every new circle or spiral depicts a new degree of existence. A good example of this symbolism, besides the sword and shield, is the symbol of a snake or a dragon ascending the "Tree of Life" (*caduceus*).⁴⁷ The two wings of the serpent are the alchemical symbols of Sulphur and Mercury, and the snakes are tied in a way to form a knot, depicting the cosmological fact that as one of the snakes pulls to one side, the more firm the knot becomes, so that constituents of this alchemical process are stronger and more closely connected, thereby illustrating the mutual paralysis of the two forces of nature when they are in a state of chaos.⁴⁸ Two snakes symbolize two opposing principles that need to be reconciled: Sulphur and Mercury. This reconciliation is happening around the golden wand (*kerykeion* or *caduceus*) which is the reflection of duality (*dyad*) waiting to be returned to the state of oneness or the Philosopher's Stone. Sometimes, instead of the two snakes, we have the alchemical symbolism of a fight between the winged snake or a dragon and a lion where the lion wins. The relationship between the Intellect and the Soul is also represented by the symbol of a dog tied to the Tree of Life, and a more direct example of this symbolism is a vine that is wrapped around a stick or pole. The rhythm of the successive wrapping and unwrapping of nature is represented by a double spiral that corresponds to two complex fundamental phases of nature.⁴⁹ All of these symbols can be found on *stećci* illustrated in Figure 24, which were created in the medieval Bosnian kingdom from the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries, in the region of Herzegovina.

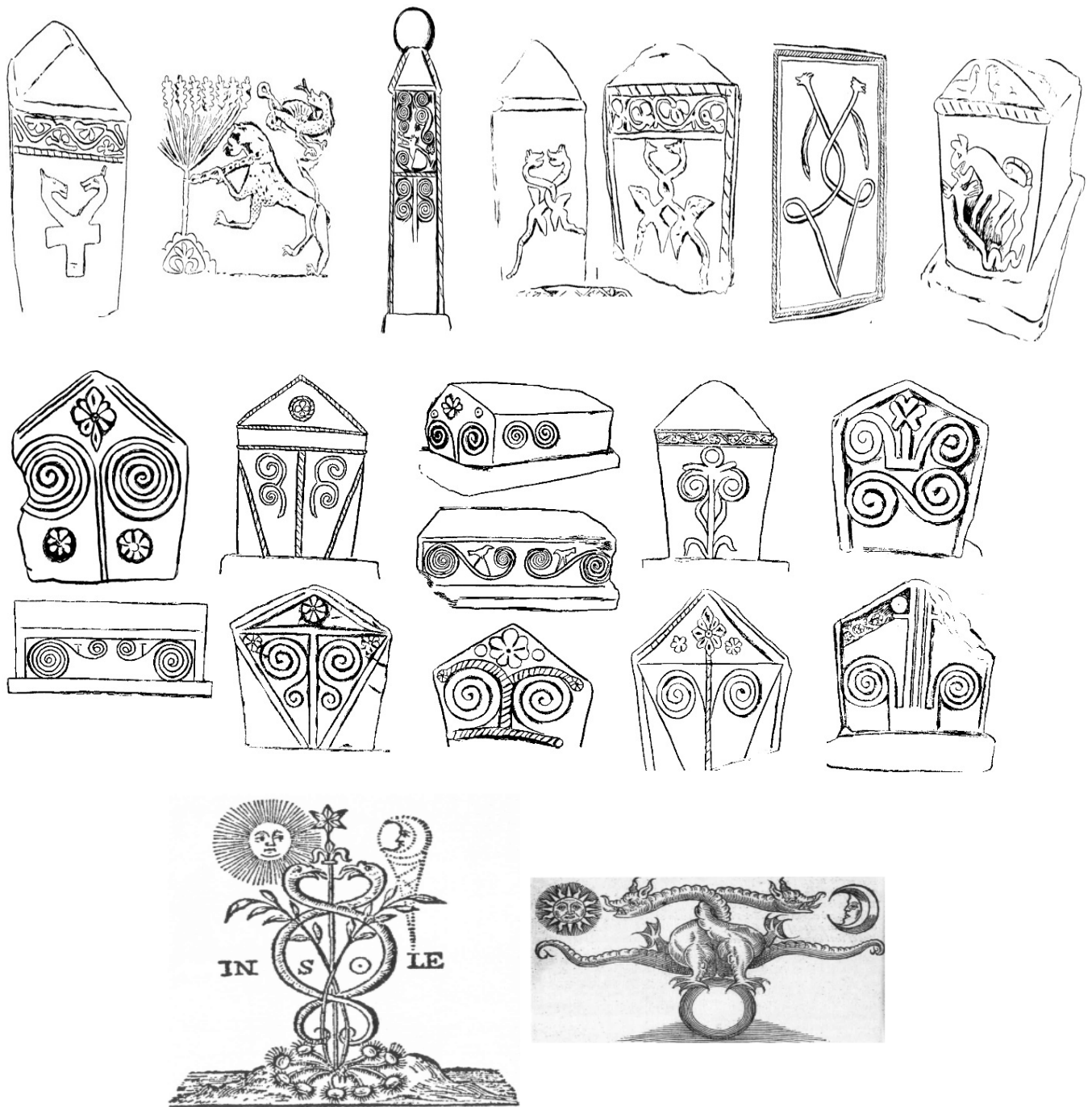


Figure 24. Symbols of spirals, dragons and serpents on stećci illustrate the mystical dynamics of the alchemical process through two opposing principles that need to be reconciled. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968).

The two principles Sulphur and Mercury are symbols of two basic generative forces. Mercury has the character of continually descending from Heaven to Earth with the function of filling bodies with life. It is also called the "water of life" (*aqua vitae*) and the "divine source" in which

the Sun and the Moon (the Intellect and the Soul) must be bathed to be rejuvenated.⁵⁰ Mercury is a living light that enlightens every soul that it sees. Sulphur is the penetrating spiritual light that causes the true transmutation of the Soul. The Soul is turning from the outside world, and, as the result of seeing internally in itself, it is becoming a static crystal filled with light.

The marriage or the union of Sulphur and Mercury, Sun and Moon, King and Queen is the central theme of alchemy. When we talk about the philosophy of Neoplatonism, the Soul tends to be led astray and turns away from the Divine (Above) toward the material world (Below). That is why the Soul must be reunited with Divinity through finding Itself. Similarly, alchemy believes that people are divided between the two natures within themselves, and all this because of their loss of Adam's original state.⁵¹ This duality of human nature is caused by the fall from Divinity, so that duality is the state of separation and contradiction, alluding to the fact that Adam and Eve became aware of this duality only after the Fall into the Lower World of generation and death.⁵² In order to regain its integral original nature, the person must balance the two natures within the self, and this process is often represented on stećci either by the alchemical androgenic male-female symbol or by a vertical line. If the state of connection with the Divine is represented by the symbol of the vertical line, then the state of separation or duality is represented by a horizontal line. When we talk of a horizontal line, we should always include the duality of human nature that is represented by Sulphur and Mercury, similar to the relationship between the right and left hand, as illustrated on the tombstones in Figure 25.

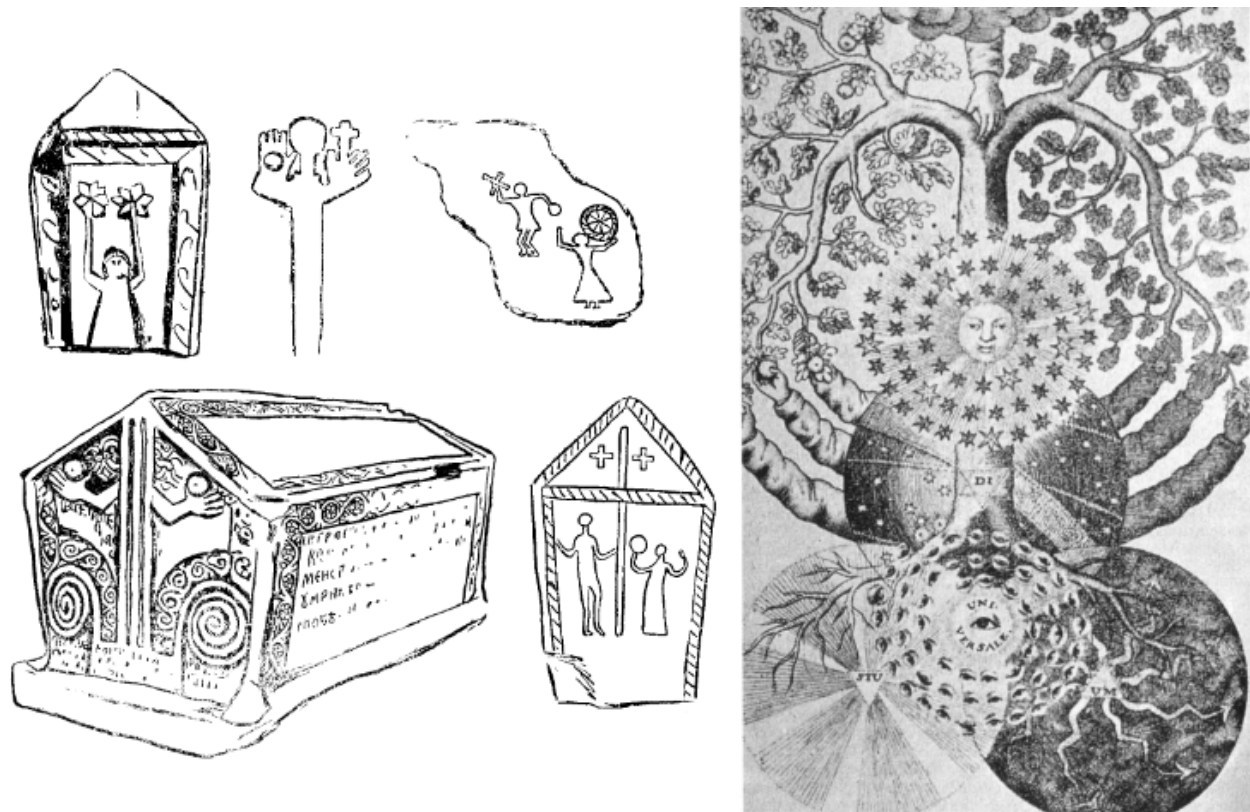


Figure 25: The Tree of Life (Being) possesses the following duality or dichotomy: attraction (Neoplatonic procession) and rejection (Neoplatonic reversion), day and night. In these images, there is a movement toward Below (the first hand as part of the Upper World) and a movement toward Above (six hands as

part of the Lower World). In the middle is the dyad, symbolizing the force of separation, which is also the symbol of the spiritual center of the universe. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968); and *The Book of Alchemy: Learn the Secrets of the Alchemists to Transform Mind, Body, and Soul*, by Francis Melville (B.E.S. Publishing, 2002).

By crossing the vertical and horizontal axis, the cross is created, where the upper part implies the source of the spiritual light (consciousness of the Intellect), while the lower part implies the dark blue *materia* (the unconscious nature of the Soul). Two horizontal hands measure the two opposite energies of the Soul, which are Sulphur and Mercury. Therefore, it can be said that through the reconciliation or marriage of these initially contradictory powers, there is also a reconciliation of all that is Above (Spirit) and what is Below (Soul).⁵³ This can also be represented by the symbol of two snakes ascending the vertical axis or cross, where one snake represents light, and the other darkness, so that through their unification, the nature of dark is transmuted into the nature of light. The two principles or forces within Spirit and Soul (Sulphur and Mercury) are represented by the symbols of the sun and the moon. So, through the marriage of male and female principles in nature, there is also the final marriage of the Intellect and the Soul, where the light-filled Soul surrenders to the Intellect.⁵⁴ The symbolism of marriage or union is most closely related to the symbolism of death. Through marriage between people there is a death of their independence, while after the death of one of them comes a reunion where the body joins the earth, while the Soul goes back to its original essence Above.⁵⁵



Figure 26. In alchemy, Sulphur is completely surrendered to Mercury, and Mercury is completely surrendered to Sulphur where both become one. As seen on stećci in these illustrations, this relationship within marriage can be represented in alchemy as one of lovers, but also as angry opponents in conflict with the symbolism of violence, war, and struggle. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968)

Theurgy and Stećci

Philosophy is purifying, religion illuminating, but theurgy is uplifting.⁵⁶ Theurgy is a ritual practice that transcends knowledge and places emphasis on experience and living religion. The word “theurgy” itself comes from the Greek words: *theos* - the Divine, and *ergos* - work, meaning that it is a ritualized divine activity or divine work. The execution of the theurgical ritual was the culmination of philosophical development of an enlightened human being. This ritual is best suited on the occasion of a person's death, and it could be related to the creation of the stećci phenomenon.

Symbols of theurgy on stećci portray the presence of Divinity, or the ability of the soul to unite. The theurgists believed that they needed to recall all of the aspects that caused the Soul to fall into the material world through the making of certain theurgical recipes that are the reflection and recapitulation of the act of creation. Unlike Gnostics and Manichaeans, who believed that they could achieve the return of the soul by escape from the cosmos, the medieval mystics of Bosnia most likely thought that *apotheosis* of the soul can only be achieved through the mimesis of cosmogony or the imitation of the creation of the Soul.⁵⁷ In other words, the return to the source Above is not an easy process and cannot be done by intellectual asceticism alone but only through ritual practices such as carving enigmatic tombstones, alluding to the practice of theurgy perceived as a technique of passivity whose aim is to make oneself totally receptive to divine power. Therefore, divine symbols (*sunthemata*-seals, *semeia*-signs) are all around us in the Lower World.⁵⁸ They are the central element in every stećci theurgical practice and they invoke the Platonic recollection of the original Forms that the Soul saw at its beginning: "Theurgy controls the divine symbols and through their virtue man rises to union with the Upper Realms."⁵⁹

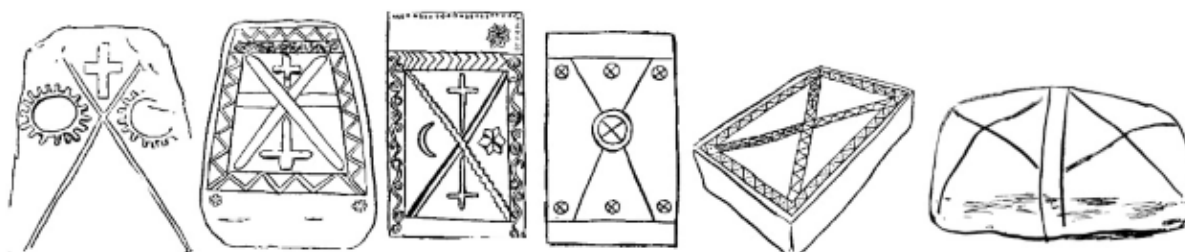


Figure 27. When Neoplatonic philosophers are talking about the act of creation, they primarily think of the World-Soul that is described in *Timaeus* through the form of the Greek letter *chi* (x), containing the characteristics of similarity and difference. The symbol or form of the chi (x) is most evocative in its symbolism of attracting the divine light in the soul, and most likely represents the expression of complete theurgy, as seen on stećci in these illustrations. Illustrations taken from *Ukrasni motivi na stećcima*, by Marian Wenzel (Sarajevo, 1968)

Conclusion

Alchemy, along with alchemical symbols and practices, was an integral part of the spirituality of medieval Bosnia and was also an individual expression of spiritual purification and achievement of salvation through the so-called Philosopher's Stone (*Lapis Philosophorum*). Alchemical symbols represent a practical activity based on philosophy and theology, which only have

importance when they exclusively serve spirituality. Alchemy in the context of the medieval Bosnian Church is nothing other than the practical expression of purification and the attainment of the original state of virtue (*kr(e)st*) by the believer *kr(e)stjanin*. Alchemical symbols on metal are identical to theurgical symbols on stone, and both practices are significant only when they serve spirituality exclusively.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Endnotes

¹ Stećak necropolis Pavlovac contains stećak with a total weight of 32 tons.

² Šefik Bešliagić, *Stećci, kultura i umjetnost* (1979), 111.

³ "gost" Milutin's stećak in Humsko near Foča; "gost" Mišljen's stećak with inscription in Puhovac near Zenica,

"starac" Bolunović's stećak with inscription in Boljuni near Stolac.

⁴ Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books Inc., 1971), 54.

⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁶ Ibid., 55.

⁷ Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 82.

⁸ Gary Lachman, *The Quest for Hermes Trismegistus: From Ancient Egypt to the Modern World* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2011), 43.

⁹ Ebeling, *The Secret History*, 52.

¹⁰ Ibid., 54.

¹¹ Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 71.

¹² Ibid., 71.

¹³ Ibid., 63.

¹⁴ Ibid., 63.

¹⁵ Alexander Roob, *Alchemy & Mysticism: The Hermetic Museum* (Köln: Taschen, 1997), 83.

¹⁶ In the Hermetic tradition, unlike the Bible, the revelation is under a veil of secrecy and mystery, and it is not accessible to everyone. Symbols in the service of cryptography actually reveal their true significance only to those who are initiated. Hermetic tradition used the symbols in their direct relation with the world, because for them the world was a universe of signs and a system in which each thing has its own fingerprint, signature or meaning. Therefore, Hermeticism can be observed as philosophy without "discourse" which communicates through symbols with a dose of mystery. Perhaps Hermeticism fascinated so many people because of the possibility of numerous analogies and links with different traditions, such as Platonism, Stoicism, Gnosticism, and even part of Aristotle's doctrines.

¹⁷ Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 65.

¹⁸ Ibid., 65.

¹⁹ The esoteric concept of Active Intellect which was most likely directly taken from Porphyry confirmed the possibility of entering the human intellect in a state of "happiness" through a process of "conjunction" with the Active Intellect (agent intellect, active intelligence, active reason, or productive intellect).

²⁰ Alchemy of prayer was especially significant in Islamic mysticism. In fact, it stands in direct connection with the *zikir* / *dhikr*, the method of "recollection" which absolutely corresponds to the Platonic theory of "recollection." Invocation of the Divine's names awakens an awareness of the absolute, the Divine that permeates and improves the whole being.

²¹ Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 66.

²² Ibid., 66.

²³ Ibid., 66.

²⁴ Ibid., 66.

²⁵ Ibid., 66.

²⁶ Annemieke Rosalinde Verboon, *Lines of Thought: Diagrammatic Representation and the Scientific Texts of the Arts Faculty, 1200-1500* (Faculty of the Humanities, Leiden University, 2010), 92.

²⁷ The figure can be found in: Barbara Obrist, "Le diagramme isidorien des saisons, son contenu physique et les représentations figuratives," in *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

²⁸ Annemieke Verboon, "The Medieval Tree of Porphyry: An Organic Structure of Logic." In *The Tree: Symbol, Allegory, and Mnemonic Device in Medieval Art and Thought*, (International Medieval Congress, Pippa Saloni, and Andrea Worm, 2014), 83-101.

²⁹ Jacques Fontaine, *Traité de la nature, suivi de l'Épître en vers du roi Sisebut à Isidore*, (Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études Hispaniques 28, Bordeaux: Féret, 1960), 201-203.

³⁰ The Aristotelian fifth element is in Heaven, and the task of alchemists is to "pull" it down to earth through repeated transmutations.

³¹ Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 70.

³² At the top of Plotinus' hierarchy of hypostasis is the One (hen, "God," theos). Although human beings cannot explain it nor present it in any shape or form, but it can be seen only metaphorically as Super Form which is above all other forms, and we can name it Goodness. The Goodness infuses knowledge and truth even though it is separate from them and above any conceptualization. For Plato's "Goodness," Plotinus uses the term the One because he wants to emphasize the unity of its existence and its simplicity without the complexity of any external components. All that exists is generated by the One and to some extent reflects its nature, unity, and goodness. So in a certain qualitative sense, we can say that all is One thing, or better yet, that One is in all things, but better than them. A good allegory for the One was given by Plato himself presenting it as a brilliant light Above, which illuminates everything in the Upper World, like the sun that shines on all the earth. The best metaphor for the One is a geometric form, which is also found on the Stećak tombstones in large numbers. It has no parts, no limits, no restrictions, yet it is the source of everything else in geometry. For example, to define the circle we can do it only from the point in the center, so this point in itself has the potential for all geometric shapes, while at the same time is absolutely simple, undivided, undefined, limitless and without structure. For Platonists, what is simple is the most perfect because it comes from the absolute simplicity that comes from the One.

³³ Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 84.

³⁴ Ibid., 84.

³⁵ Alexander Roob, *Alchemy & Mysticism: The Hermetic Museum* (Köln: Taschen, 1997), 33.

³⁶ The dove on the Tree symbolizes the presence of the Spirit/Intellect which begins the process of creation directed Below with assistance of the *prima materia*.

³⁷ The third (Yellow) phase is often not taken as a true phase because it had a mediating role of connecting or uniting. Therefore in the fifteenth century, phases of alchemy were reduced to three: black, white and red, so the yellow phase is only seen as a transitional phase being an "assistant" to connect other alchemical phases.

³⁸ Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 88.

³⁹ Transmutation: the transformation of an ordinary substance into "higher" or "real" substance; the ascent of the human soul.

⁴⁰ Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 88.

⁴¹ Jaroslav Šidak, *Studije o "Crkvi bosanskoj" i bogumilstvu* (Zagreb: Liber, 1975), 32.

⁴² Ibid., 32.

⁴³ Roob, *Alchemy & Mysticism*, 35.

⁴⁴ Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 77.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁷ The symbol of Hermes with caduceus is found in the medieval Bosnian fortress of Samobor, near Goražde.

⁴⁸ Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 77.

⁴⁹ Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 77.

⁵⁰ Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 77.

⁵¹ The Fall of Adam disrupted the perfect relationship between the Upper and Lower Worlds, so the unity of Heaven and Earth was destroyed.

⁵² Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 79.

⁵³ Ibid., 79.

⁵⁴ If we would use the term "Platonic dualism" here, we should first point out that it has nothing to do with the Gnostic or Manichaean conception of dualism, but that it is all about connection and relationship between the Upper World (the Spirit/symbol of the sword) and the Lower World (the Soul/symbol of the shield) which are never separated, but they are connected to such a degree that they can be viewed as mutual reflections.

⁵⁵ Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, 79.

⁵⁶ Jeffrey S. Kupperman, *Living Theurgy, A Course in Iamblichus' Philosophy, Theology and*

Theurgy (Avalonia, 2014), 63.

⁵⁷ Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (Hermeneutics: Studies in the History of Religions), 51.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 51

⁵⁹ Glenn Magee, *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 15.