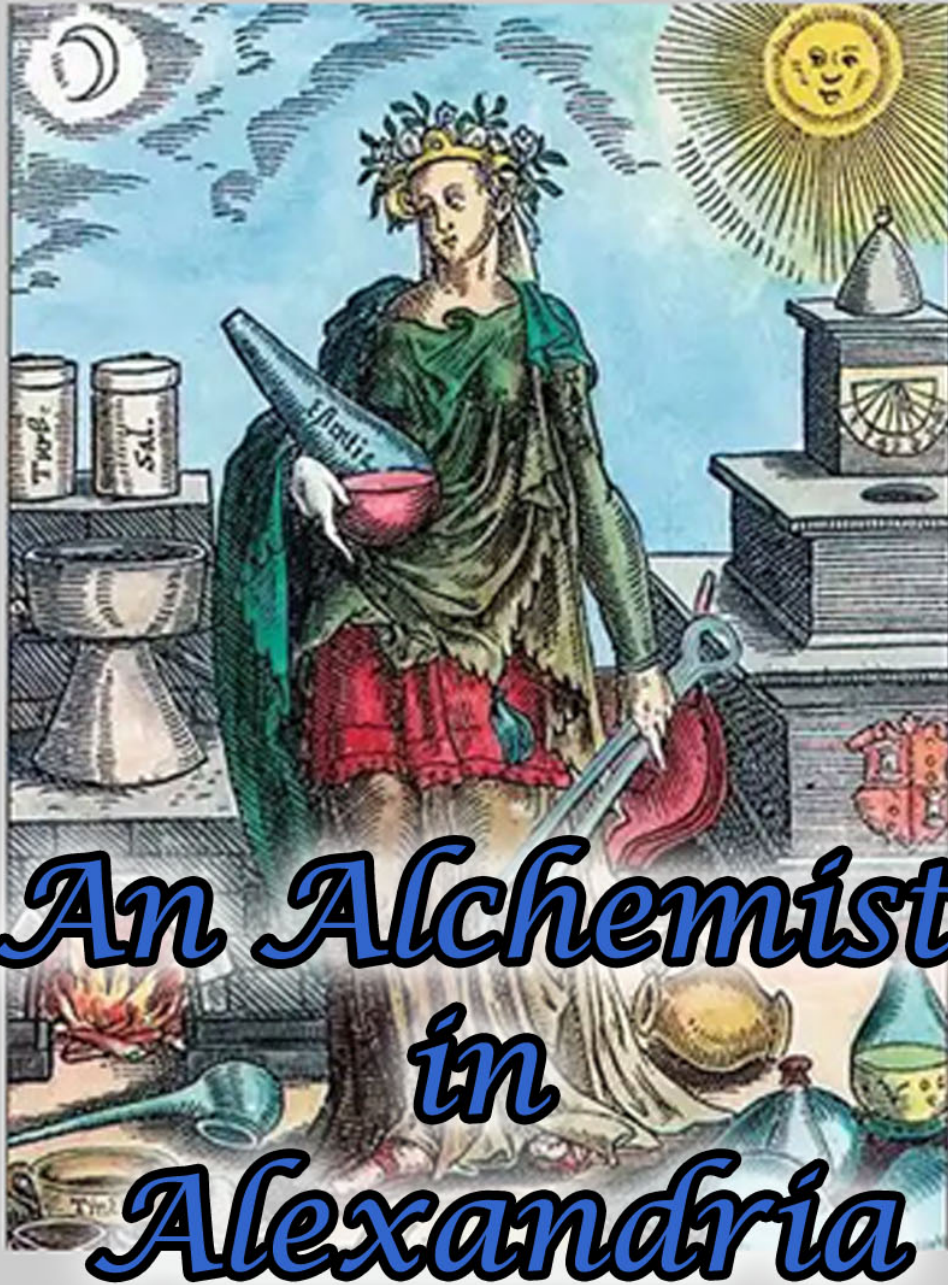


MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY



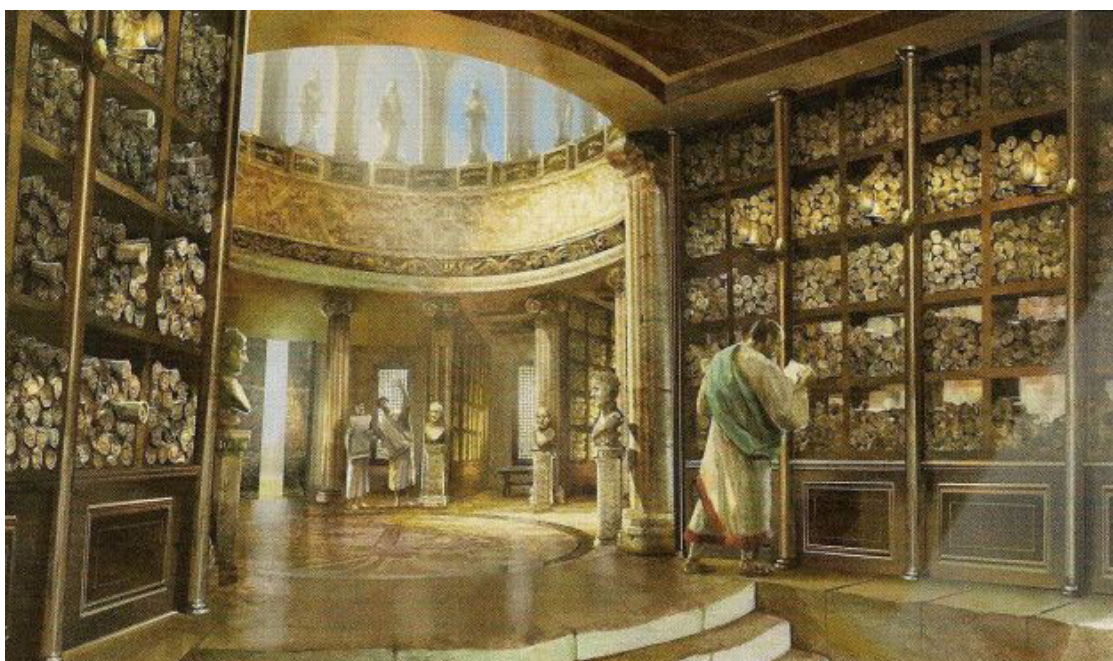
An Alchemist in Alexandria

HELEN MARTINEAU

AN ALCHEMIST IN ALEXANDRIA

Maria Hebraica

This city on the coast of the Nile delta was a centre of learning with the famous library housing knowledge drawn from major cultures, even from as far away as China and India. It was a multi-cultural city, Roman, Greek, Jewish, indigenous Egyptians, and with an eclectic mixture of philosophies and religions. Women were not necessarily excluded from participating. Males and females celebrated the Egyptian initiatory cults – those of Serapis and Isis were the most popular. The Jewish Therapeutae were a community focused on healing of body and soul with an ascetic lifestyle, a philosophy dedicated to purity and wisdom and where women and men had equal status. There were neo-Platonic philosophical schools, Gnostics, Christians and there was Maria Hebraica.



The library at Alexandria with around 700,000 scrolls, part of the Museion dedicated to the nine muses; and destroyed in the late third century

In *Marriages of the Magdalene* I sent Mary Magdalene for a time to Alexandria. There she connected with a community of female wisdom seekers; Greek women who longed to forge their own path free of male patriarchal influence. As the heart of that community, she led them into the Christ mystery that was born from her personal initiatory experience. Behind the gnostic Mary of the Nag Hammadi

discoveries is the living Mary who could have been the leader I imagined, and she would have espoused and taught that one can through dedication and love achieve knowledge of the divine realms and union with the Christ spirit.

And then only recently I came across Maria Hebraica – Mary the Jewess, an influential female alchemist in Alexandria who lived sometime between the first and the third centuries. This raised the question: was there something more behind my fictional Magdalene episode? Is the image on the front page based on a real woman? Is this another legend to include in the extraordinary life of Mary Magdalene?

Alchemist and prophetess

In the annals of alchemy, Mary the Jewess was known and acknowledged as the first alchemist in the Western world. This Mary was also called *Maria Prophetissima*, Mary the Prophetess – another title that piqued my interest. Our primary knowledge of her comes from an alchemical work by a late third to early fourth century Gnostic Christian, Zozimos of Panopolis, although she is mentioned in many other sources.

This legendary Mary is said to have founded an academy in the renowned city of Alexandria. There she taught alchemy and was a hands-on inventor. She is credited with inventing an alchemical apparatus that maintained a consistent gentle heat in a kind of double boiler. This apparatus would become a staple in modern chemistry labs and is still used in chemical processes that require gentle heat, as well as in slow cooking. It is named after her – the bain-marie, Mary's bath.

She is the first to be described as using the *tribikos*, a kind of alchemical still, and the *kerotakis* that collects vapours in a sealed airtight container – 'hermetically sealed' describes this useful process. 'Mary's black' is also named for her, a black sulphide coating on the metal covering the kerotakis.

What is Alchemy?

The name comes from Arabic *alkīmiyā*, roughly 'the black magic', not a dark art but a name derived from the ancient Coptic word for Egypt, *kēme* or *khem*, 'black earth', referring to the fertile black soil left after the annual flooding of the Nile.

The alchemical art was couched in highly symbolic language. It was widely practised in the ancient world and its wisdom was said to have come from Thoth, Egyptian god of communication and Isis, divine patroness of magic. The legendary Hermes Trismegistus, thrice-great Hermes, said to have lived around the time of Moses, introduced hermetic and alchemical knowledge to Egyptian sages. This was an effort to preserve the purest Egyptian teaching after Egypt

became a mighty empire under Rameses the second, the pharaoh who built the great temples.

Ancient Egyptian spiritual understanding of life, death and rebirth and of the *khem* as the primordial First Matter, underpinned the origins of alchemy. As it evolved, an overt goal was the discovery of this elusive original matter, from which all others are derived.

The famous Library of Alexandria was destroyed in 391, resulting in few alchemical texts surviving from ancient times. We do have those held by Arabian alchemists and we have Zozimos. He wrote about the mysterious secret of Isis. This concerned the deep mysteries of transmutation of metals from one state to another. The purest of the earthly metals was gold. Behind this is the teaching of alchemical transformation of the human soul into the gold of spirit.

A major stage of the alchemical process is distillation, which Mary the Jewess is said to have perfected. This is described in the Emerald Tablet (a key writing of alchemy) as:

It rises from Earth to Heaven and descends again to Earth, thereby combining within Itself the powers of both the Above and the Below.

The link between heaven and earth points to an allied and even deeper purpose of the work – the ultimate spiritualisation of matter and the whole earth into spiritual gold through the power of the Philosopher’s Stone.



Mary the Jewess – pointing to heaven and earth united through alchemical practice; in Michael Maier's 17th century 'Symbola Aurea Mensae'

Mary's sayings

No written works by Mary the Jewess remain but as long as alchemy was practised its practitioners referred to her with reverence bordering on awe. Quotes credited to her are found in many hermetic writings.

Christian mysticism, Gnosticism and alchemy meet in two statements attributed to Mary. They are imbued with a profound understanding of the inner alchemy of the soul's balancing, harmonizing and union with the divine:

Join the male and the female, and you will find what is sought.

Here we have direct echoes of St Paul – 'In Christ there is neither...male nor female.' And of the Gospel of Thomas discovered at Nag Hammadi, where the seeker can enter the kingdom '...when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female.'

Then the transforming work leading to knowledge of the Self as one is affirmed in the following, known as the Axiom of Maria:

One becomes two, two becomes three, and out of the third comes the one as the fourth.

As she reaches into the future

Later descriptions of this Mary's life stated that she knew Jesus. Mary the wise Jewish alchemist with prophetic powers – could she be Mary Magdalene who vanished from the first stories of early Christianity? Zozimos was a Christian with esoteric knowledge. Could he be recalling what happened to this intelligent, gifted, visionary woman? Did the living Magdalene come to open-minded Alexandria to reveal the Christ spirit through an ancient hands-on art? And was it her purpose to revitalise a powerful esoteric practice through her direct experience of Christ Jesus?

Or did Zozimos superimpose his fourth century alchemical ideas onto the original apostolic ministry of Mary Magdalene? Given the vagueness about when Mary lived, there may be another reality behind the legend – that we are looking at a reincarnation of the Magdalene soul as a near contemporary of Zozimos.

Christ, the universal I AM, does not belong to a religion. Mary, initiated by the Christ, knew this as eternal truth and would have lived this truth in her very being. It is possible that she entered legend as Maria Hebraica because her life was in tune with the transforming soul process known as alchemy which looked back to the knowledge of Egypt and that through Mary was leading into the future.

Over the following centuries Christian fanatics raged against other spiritualities. Alchemical and philosophical academies would have been disbanded. Yet it may have been through Mary's spiritual alignment with the ancient art that it became

an underground thread helping to keep the spirit of Christ alive in the face of the church's Romanisation and centuries of opposition to all that was not the official religion.

In Renaissance Europe, as a branch of natural philosophy alchemical practices were significant for the emergence of empirical science, especially chemistry and medicine. But the spiritual aspect would eventually be relegated to the dustbin of superstitions and the ancient practice dismissed as primitive chemistry, which in many ways it was.

Alchemists were known for their attempts to transmute base metals of the earth into gold. Lesser practitioners stopped there, giving alchemy a reputation for charlatanism. Alchemy faded as a practice with the emergence of the consciousness soul and new ways of being.

The real 'work', however, had always existed within the outer form. From the mythic Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton, mathematician and discoverer of calculus in the late seventeenth century, the practice of alchemy was an active meditation, where the inner process was focused on transmuting self to attain wisdom and to ultimately attain the Elixir of Life. This elixir is none other than the spiritual self, the I AM that would unite with the soul well prepared. That inner work continues.