

Chemistry took its rise from alchemy. It sprang up among those scientific dreamers of the first centuries of the Christian era, whose guiding star in their search for knowledge was their belief in the transmutation of the baser metals into gold. Their theory of the constitution of matter led them to believe in the existence of a sort of ferment, at the touch of which transmutation would occur. This philosopher's stone was also regarded by many as a panacea for all human ailments; so we find thus early the efforts of a class of men turned towards the discovery of a universal medicine, rather than of inexhaustible lucre. Alchemy, although almost divorced from medicine of the time, indirectly contributed not a little to its advancement. The later alchemists, despairing of finding this magic substance in the mineral kingdom, sought for it in the products of animal life. All parts of the human body were assayed. The philosophy of the period taught them to regard man as an epitome of the universe, a microcosm, and his body as a sort of mysterious agent by which the viler material composing his food was transformed into the nobler thinking individual. They naturally concluded that he must possess within him some great transforming agent, and that substances that remained for a long time in the body must be strongly impregnated with this powerful transmuting substance.

Besides many less important results, this search for the philosopher's stone in the human body led to the discovery and partial isolation of urea, uric acid, phosphoric acid and the element phosphorus, and thus gave us the first facts in physiological chemistry. The history of these fruitless endeavours to find a universal medicine, though, properly speaking, merely the history of a superstition, will always prove interesting to the student of science as a record of the strange phases through which scientific knowledge has passed in the course of its slow development; and also of the difficulties and obstacles against which the human intellect has had to struggle in the past, while seeking a solution of the great problems presented by nature.

Towards the end of the fifteenth century chemistry began to throw off the yoke of alchemy. It was just at this period that independent criticism began to spread, and traditional