

Nicolas Flamel:
The Legend of the Legend of the Legend

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If you are interested in alchemy, then you have certainly heard of the famous 14th century alchemist Nicholas Flamel. But did he really exist or is it just a legend? He was believed to have discovered the philosopher's stone and to have thereby achieved immortality. His story is a typical example of how a legend is born and then takes on a life of itself.

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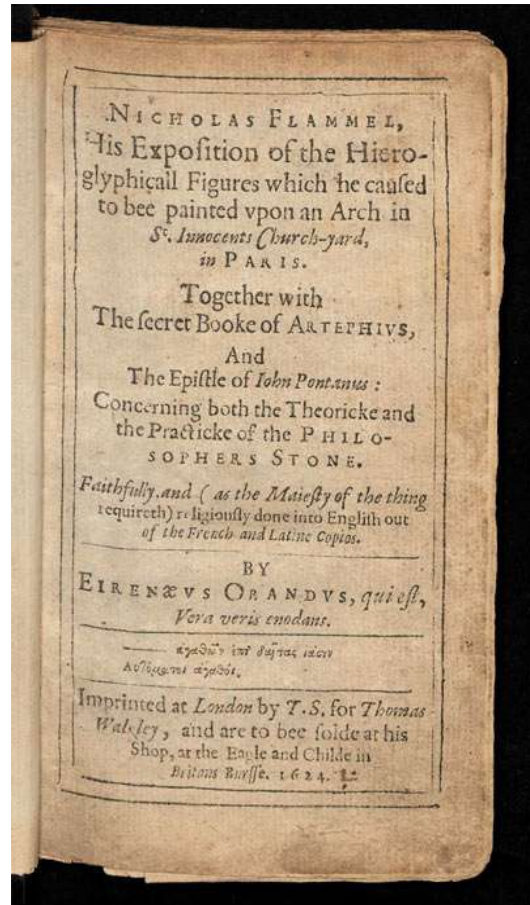
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The 1612 Book of the Hieroglyphic Figures of Nicolas Flamel

In 1612 a book was published containing three alchemical manuscripts, under the title of *Trois Traitez de la Philosophie Naturelle Non Encore Imprimez (Three Treatises of the Natural Philosophy Not Yet Published)*, the whole translated by Pierre Arnould de la Chevallerie. The third text in this book was written by an author who used the pseudonym Eiranaeus Orandus, and was called *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques de Nicolas Flamel écrivain, ainsi qu'elles sont en la quatrieme arche du Cymetiere des Innocens a Paris, entrant par la porte, rue saint Denis, devers la main droite, avec l'explication d'icelles pas le dit Flamel, traittant de la transmutation metallique, non jamais imprimé.* (The book of hieroglyphic figures of Nicolas Flamel writer, as they are in the fourth arch of the Cemetery of the Innocents in Paris, entering by the door, rue Saint Denis, towards the right hand, with the explanation of them but not by Flamel, dealing with

metallic transmutation, never printed before).



What does *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques* teach us? The text was purported to have been written by Flamel at his home in 1399, while living at the rue des Ecrivains close to the Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie church. He describes himself as a notary "living in our Art of Writing, by making Inventories, dressing accounts, and summing up the expenses of Tutors and Pupils". While exercising his profession, something happened that would radically change his life:

"...there fell into my hands for the sum of two florins, a gilded Book, very old and large. It was not of Paper, nor of Parchment, as other Books be, but was only made of delicate rinds (as it seemed unto me) of tender young trees. The cover of it was of brass, well bound, all engraved with letters, or strange figures; and for my part I think they might well be Greek Characters, or some-such-like ancient language. Sure I am, I could not read them, and I know well they were not notes nor letters of the Latin nor of the Gaul, for of them we understand a little. As for that which was within it, the leaves of bark or rind, were engraved, and with admirable diligence written, with a point of Iron, in fair and neat Latin letters, colored. It contained thrice-seven leaves,..."

The title was written in large gilded letters: *Abraham the Jew, Prince, Priest, Levite, Astrologer, and Philosopher, to the Nation of the Jews, by the Wrath of God dispersed among the Gauls*. This original manuscript Flamel had purchased

has become known as the *Book of Abraham the Jew*.

Flamel then describes the seven emblems in the book, and that he could not decipher them. He showed them to the clergy in Paris, but they could not help him either. Finally he met a master called Anseaulme, who explained him the process of making the Philosopher's Stone. After 21 years of experimenting he was unsuccessful, and he went to Spain as a pilgrim to see "some Jewish priests in a Synagogue". When he returned from Spain, he met a surgeon, Master Canches, in Leon. Canches told him that he had heard about Flamel's manuscript, and that it was thought to be lost. On the way home, Canches explained him all the figures of the book. But then he died, and Flamel buried him in the church of the Holy Cross at Orleans. Back home he was able to transmute mercury into silver, and then silver into gold. The year was 1382.

He then explains all the good deeds they did with their riches:

"...I had already founded, and endued with revenues, 14 Hospitals in this City of Paris, we had now built from the ground three Chapels, we had enriched with great gifts and good rents, seven Churches, with many reparations in their Churchyards, besides that which we have done at Bologne, which is not much less than that which we have done here. I will not speak of the good which both of us have done to particular poor folks, principally to widows and poor orphans,..."

After this text by Flamel, which was translated from Latin by the publisher Pierre Arnauld de la Chevallerie, Arnauld then gives his explanation of the hieroglyphic figures of the arch that Flamel had erected in the Cemetery of the Innocents.

Here is the engraving from the book, showing the the 'hieroglyphic figures' of the arcade in the cemetery:



Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques de Nicolas Flamel, from a 1624 edition

In the lower row are illustrations of how the Innocents were killed by order of King Herod. Just above it, are five scenes successively depicting two dragons fighting (the illicit greed of gold), a couple (to guard against the dragons), the resurrection, two angels and finally a man felled by a winged lion (the sinner who dies without repentance). In the center of the vaulted tympanum above this frieze is Jesus Christ holding a globe with a cross. On his right is the kneeling Flamel together with Saint Paul. On his left Perrenelle, his wife, who is also on her knees and is together with Saint Peter. In the corners and at the top of the tympanum are angels praising God.

Livre des figures hiéroglyphiques contains all the iconographic details and peculiarities of all the scenes, which are explained by Arnauld in alchemical terms. Curiously, the text gives no explanation of the seven pictures of the *Book of Abraham the Jew*, which are nevertheless described by Flamel.

The Holy Innocents' Cemetery (Cimetière des Innocents) was a cemetery in Paris that was used from the Middle Ages until the late 18th century. It was the oldest and largest cemetery in Paris and had often been used for mass graves. In the

14th and 15th centuries, during Flamel's time, citizens constructed arched structures called *charniers* or *charnel houses* along the cemetery walls to relieve the overcrowding of the mass graves; bones from the graves were excavated and then deposited here.

In 1389 Flamel had another arch built opposite the one he had decorated with paintings. The arch which had paintings, showed three more plates in iron and gilded copper on the south, east and west sides, but Flamel did not describe them.

Popularity and Critique of the *Book of Hieroglyphic Figures*

So far the entire history of Flamel occurs for the first time in *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques de Nicolas Flamel*, in 1612, some two centuries after Flamel had lived. No medieval original, neither of the *Book of Hieroglyphic Figures* written by Flamel, nor of *the Book of Abraham the Jew* which Flamel had bought, has ever been found.

Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques became immediately popular, and it has seen many reissues and translations. Soon after its first publication, Latin pseudo-originals were forged. They were Latin translation of the 1612 French edition. Other texts soon appeared attributed to Flamel, but which were translation of other alchemical texts; and rumors and stories circulated with additional details of Flamel's life.

A century later, a heated debate arose between several clergy with arguments for and against the existence of Flamel, or the validity of the Latin manuscript Eiranaeus Orandus had based himself on. The validity was first questioned in 1761 by Etienne Villain. He claimed that the source of the Flamel legend was P. Arnaud de la Chevalerie himself, the translator and publisher of the three alchemical texts, which included *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques de Nicolas Flamel*, under the pseudonym Eiranaeus Orandus.

The analysis of the alchemical sources of *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques* reinforces this doubt. A recent French researcher and writer Claude Gagnon, in his *Description du Livre des Figures Hiéroglyphiques attribué à Nicolas Flamel* (1994), suggests that Arnaud would have based himself on *Auriferae artis, quam chemiam vocant, antiquissimi authores, sive Turba philosophorum*, published for the first time in 1572 (this is a large collection of alchemical works). *Auriferae artis* contains the text of *De lapide philosophico* written by Lamsprinck; and Arnaud uses a quote from this text. Lamsprinck was not known at the time of Flamel. There are also references to *the Turba Philosophorum*, the *Livre d'Hercule*.

Despite the fact that that Flamel's *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques* dates from 1399, Claude Gagnon says that it can be clearly demonstrated from the vocabulary used and the style of wording in *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques*

that it could not have originated before 1590.

The title of the 1612 French first edition contains the word *hiéroglyphiques*, a term that didn't exist at the time of Flamel.

Flamel uses the word Cabala two times, "leur Cabale traditive" and "les ancient sages Cabalistes", terms that do not appear in alchemical writings until the end of the 16th and early 17th centuries.

Did the original Latin text on which Flamel based himself exist? In the first paragraph Flamel says "I learned only a little Latin, because my parents did not were very well-to-do". It is astonishing that a man of the Middle Ages who knew only a little Latin should have written a book in this language.

Beroalde de Verville as the Real Author of *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques*

The assumption that the real author of *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques* was Arnauld de la Chevalerie comes from an 18th century note by the then librarian at the Bibliotheque de Sainte-Genevieve who mentioned a now seemingly lost romance entitled *Aventures d'Ali el Moselan sumomme dans ses conquetes Slomnal Calife* (Paris, 1582) translated from the Arabic by one curious Rabi el Ullae de Deon. The note makes clear that the translator's odd name (Rabi el Ullae de Deon) is an anagram for Beroalde de Verville, while the last word (*Slomnal Calife*) is a perfect anagram of Nicolas Flamel.

This connection has led Claude Gagnon to conjecture that Beroalde is also the actual author of Flamel's *Livre des Figures Hiéroglyphiques*, first published in 1612 in translation by the otherwise unknown character Arnaud de la Chevalerie. Gagnon says that the translator's name is an imperfect anagram of Beroalde de Verville (Arnauld de Cabalerie).

Artis auriferae was published in Basel in 1572. Beroald de Verville took up residence in the same city of Basel as a Huguenot refugee and could have worked on these texts to create a venerable tradition in Flamel's name.

Another element is that Béroalde de Verville publishes, in the same year and with the same publisher as *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques*, *Le Palais des Curieux* in which he warns his alchemist readers against "those who disappoint you, and who under the beautiful tales of Flammel & others hope for your souls to ruin them".

Another argument seems even more decisive. When Flamel returned to France with his tutor, Canches, the latter died on the way home. In this regard, the text tells us:

"I had him buried in the church of Sainte Croix in Orléans, where he still rests. God have his soul, for he died a good Christian. And surely, if I be not hindered by death, I will give unto that Church some revenue to cause some Masses to be said for his soul every day."

Etienne François Villain, who wrote *Histoire Critique De Nicolas Flamel Et De Pernelle Sa Femme* (1761), had an investigation carried out if Flamel had indeed gave donations to have these masses carried out. On page 25 Villain writes in regard to Flamel's pledge to honor the dead Canches:

"Recently M. Paris, Grand Vicar of Diocese of Orléans, kindly ordered a full and exact research to be carried out, (these are the terms of a letter written on this subject, which was communicated to me) & no vestige of a donation made by Flamel has been found. We add that no one from the Chapter has heard of him, Writer, founder & generous benefactor, has he therefore forgotten, and his friend, and his promise? And at least how did Canches not have a place in Flamel's so long and well thought-out will? The reader will draw the consequences himself."

How could Flamel forget his meeting with a man who explained him the entire manuscript so he could finally perform the alchemical work and become immensely rich? Villain also provides us with the entire text of Flamel's testament on page 370 (*Acte du Commissaire Àndry le Preux, pour Un des comptes de l'exécution du testament de Nicolas Flamel, made in 1416*), in which there is mention of any donation to the church of Sainte Croix.

Previous Publications under the Name of Nicolas Flamel

The 1612 *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques* was the first text that claimed to have been written by Flamel himself. But its author, probably Béroalde de Verville, most likely based himself on an already spreading rumor that Nicolas Flamel had to be an alchemist because he was wealthy. By the way, throughout the centuries, other people who got extremely wealthy were said to have discovered the Philosopher's Stone. It was a way of explaining how they got rich without knowing the true source of their riches.

The oldest trace of a Flamel text dates from the end of the 15th century: *Le Livre Flamel*, which is in fact the French translation of a treatise in Latin from the 14th century, the *Flos florum* (The Flower of the Flowers), attributed at the time to the alchemist Arnaud de Villeneuve. This text was widely distributed, and a short version was translated into English in the middle of the 16th century. It was a kind of tradition among alchemists to publish an alchemical text under the name of a famous alchemist, in order to attract more attention, and of course, sales.

Other treaties were attributed to Flamel during the 16th century. This is particularly the case with the *Livre des laveures* (Book of Washerwomen), which is in fact the French translation of the 14th century Latin manuscript *Rosarius Philosophorum* (The Philosophical Rosary) by the English alchemist John Dastin (c.1293-c.1386). It was also attributed to Dastin's contemporary Arnaldus de Villa Nova (1238-1311 or 1313) and translated into French under the title *La Vraie Pratique de la noble science d'alchimie*. Then it was published under Flamel's name with the title *Livre des laveures*.

At the same time the idea arose that the religious allegorical figures that adorn the arcades of the Cemetery of the Innocents had alchemical meanings. The first trace of this is found in the book *De antiquitate et veritate artis chemicæ* (On antiquity and truth of chemical art), published in 1561 by alchemist Robertus Vallensis; (Robert Duval) (a treatise which later was placed at the head of the first volume of the great alchemical anthology the *Theatrum Chemicum* of 1602):

"To this category of fictions belongs the enigma of Nicolas Flamel, which features two serpents or dragons, one winged, the other not, and a winged lion, etc. at the Cemetery of the innocents."

This idea is also found in prose commentaries from the second half of the 16th century poem *Le Grand Olympe* (which makes an alchemical interpretation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*).

Also in 1561, three alchemical poems were published in *De la Transformation Métallique: Trois Anciens Tractés en Rithme François* (published by Guillaume Guillard & Amaury Warancore), contains a text *Le Sommaire Philosophique de N. Flamel* (*The Philosophical Summary of N. Flamel*). In it we also find the two dragons, one winged, one not. That is probably the reason why the author used the name of Flamel.

The theme of the two dragons is again associated with Flamel, and the arc in the cemetery, in 1561, when Jacques Gohory published a treatise *Le Sommaire Philosophique de N. Flamel avec la défense d'iceluy art et des honestes personages qui y vaquent : contre les efforts de I. Girard mect à les outrager* (*The Philosophical Summary of N. Flamel with the defense of his art and the honest characters that goes with him: against the efforts of I. Girard to insult them*). In his preface, Jacques Gohory falsely attributed the text to Flamel:

"This book (which had not previously been brought to light) is entitled *Le Sommaire de Nicolas Flamel* who lived in 1393 to 1407, as it still appears in the city of Paris at the cemetery of the Innocents, on the monuments of two opposing arches, with the cemetery in between them, which he had erected. On one of which are, among other things, erected the effigies of two snakes or dragons and a lion, following the same description he has made in this book."

A more significant story appeared in 1578, when Noël du Fail wrote, in support of the miraculous healings of Paracelsus:

"Nicolas Flamel, Parisian, which poor writer he was, & having found in an old book a metallic receipt that proved to be one of the best of his time; testimonies of this are in the great edifices he had built at the Cemetery of the Innocents, at Sainte Genevieve des Ardens, at S. Jaques la Boucherie, where it is in half-relief, with its writing desk on the side, & the chaperone on the shoulder, considered rich both him & his Perronelle (that is his wife) by fifteen hundred thousand escus, in addition to alms & immense endowments he gave out".

From a mere false attribution of an alchemist text to Flamel at the end of the

1400's, the story had been elaborated to the point where Flamel was considered to have been a successful alchemist, with enormous wealth, and the establishment of the arcs in the Cemetery of the Innocents. The legend became so popular that it was now mocked in 1585 by Noël du Fail (who had apparently changed his position) in his *Contes et Discours d'Eutrapel*.

François Grudé de la Croix du Maine, who still listed Flamel as the author of *Le Sommaire Philosophique* in his *Bibliothèques françoises*, also reported rumors that were circulating at the time, according to which Flamel's wealth did not come from his talents as an alchemist, but from the fact that he would have appropriated the debts of the Jews, who were being expelled from Paris in 1394 by an expulsion edict of Charles VI. To conceal this fact, Flamel would have made it appear that he had discovered the philosopher's stone, and thus would have been able to finance his many donations. Albert Poisson in his *Nicolas Flamel: sa vie, ses fondations, ses oeuvres* (1893) wrote: "La Croix du Maine professes the same opinion: "The source of his wealth is such," he said, "when the Jews were driven out, he who had their papers, far from claiming their creditors or denouncing them to the king, conspired with them to not report them."

The growing legend of Flamel as having been a successful alchemist, left France in 1583, when the Belgian Paracelsian alchemist Gérard Dorn, translated passages from the *Philosophical Summary* into Latin, and we find it in Germany in 1605, and in England in 1610.

The time was just ripe for Arnaud de la Chevalerie, who must have been familiar with Flamel legend, to come up with a fictional story that he passed as a real story and a real manuscript: *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques de Nicolas Flamel*, under the pseudonym of Eiranaeus Orandus, because, after all, he himself could never provide the supposed original Latin Manuscript Flamel would have written.

Later Publications under the Name of Nicolas Flamel

The 1612 text of *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques de Nicolas Flamel* was an immediate success and widely popularized the myth of Flamel, who became the French alchemist par excellence. His supposedly immense fortune testified to his success in the search for the Philosopher's Stone. This success was perhaps partly due to the fact that at the time of the Counter-Reformation, the image of Flamel offered a figure of a Christian alchemist. The Counter-Reformation was initiated in response to the Protestant Reformation.

Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques de Nicolas Flamel has seen many reissues and translations. As already indicated, Latin pseudo-originals were forged. The figures from the *Book of Abraham the Jew* were simply described in the 1612 edition, but subsequent editions included illustrations.

Other texts were attributed to Flamel. In 1619 we have the *Traicté du Souldphre* by the Polish Michael Sendivogius, which is a collection of alchemical texts that

contains *Thresor de philosophie ou original du desir desiré de Nicolas Flamel*, which is none other than a French version of the *Thesaurus philosophiae* by Efferarius Monachus (14th century).

In 1628 we have *Le Grand Esclairissement de la Pierre Philosophale pour la transmutation de tous les métaux*, with Nicholas Flamel as author, but it is actually a French translation of the Italian treatise *Apertorio alfabetale* (1466 or 1476) by Cristoforo Parigino (Christophe de Paris).

In 1655, Pierre Borel, Counsellor and doctor to Louis XIV, and first bibliographer of alchemy, reported in his *Tresor de recherches et antiquitez gauloises et françoises* a certain number of rumors which then circulated about Flamel, among which: "It was also said that Richelieu had an alchemist named Dubois executed who presented himself as the heir to Flamel's secret"; and "It is reported that on Richelieu's death the Lord of Cabrières claimed to have in his castle the book by which Nicolas Flamel had transmuted lead into gold. This book is called THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM THE JEW or "The Ash Mezareph"."

There is a manuscript called [*Le Tresor des Tresor, Donne par Nicolas Flamel au S^t Perrier, neveu de Perenelle sa femme, en 1414*](#), dating from the 1700s, in Science Museum, London, England, under the reference MS/0383. It is handwritten with many colorful illustrations. The museum gives the following description: "Manuscript transcription of a work by Flamel on alchemy and astronomical influences. Right-hand pages bear text and colour wash illustrations, and notes in another hand. Most left-hand pages are blank, except where bearing more notes (in another hand)."

In 1735, in Erfurt, Germany, the *Uraltes chymisches Werck* (Age-Old Chemical Work) appeared. It claimed to be the a German translation of the same original manuscript that Flamel once had bought: "A very old chemical work of Rabbi Abraham Eleazar, which the author wrote partly in Latin and in Arabic, partly in Chaldean and Syriac, and which was then translated into our German language by an anonymous author". The text attempts to show how to make the Philosopher's Stone. The book also had (new set of) the figures that Flamel had only described.

More Rumors

In 1624, an alchemist friar, Father Pacifique, had large excavations run on the house on Rue d'Ecrivains that was the most visited, because that is where, according to tradition, Flamel retreated to work. But he was unsuccessful. After him, came a wealthy German nobleman who turned the house upside down, without finding anything whatsoever. Then a woman who lived in the house found in a place not yet searched some flasks full of something unknown, and she threw it away. The research and excavation did not stop until the house itself had disappeared.

The historian of Paris, Henri Sauval, wrote in his *Histoire et recherches des antiquites de la ville de Paris* (*History and research into the Antiquities of the city*

of Paris) (1724) wrote that curiosity seekers had spent so much time "riffing and searching through over this house that all that remained of it was solid cellars covered in graffiti and fanciful hieroglyphs." The craziness went even further: "The hermetics who searched everywhere for the Philosopher's Stone without being able to find it, have meditated so much on some portals of our Churches, that in the end they found there what they claimed. ... They distil the spirit to quintessential Gothic verses & figures, some in the round, others scratched, as they say, on the stones both of the house on the corner of the rue Marivaux, and that of the two Hospitals he [Flamel] had built in the Rue de Montmorency."

At the same time, (1623-1676), is more dubious: "The hermetics who search all over for the Philosopher's Stone without being able to find it, have meditated so much on some portals of our Churches, than on in the end they found what they claimed. [...] They distill their minds to quintessential Gothic verses & figures, some in the well-formed stones, or in eroded stones, as they said, on the stones both of the house on the corner of rue Marivaux, and of both Hospitals he [Flamel] had built in the rue de Montmorency."

In spite of the decline of alchemy in the 18th century, and the rise of objective science, some scientists still held on to alchemical ideas. Isaac Newton still believed in the possibility of transmutation, and he was interested in *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques de Nicolas Flamel*.

Immortality

The legend took another step forward. Louis XIV sent an archeologist named Paul Lucas on a mission to the East. He was to study antiquities and bring back any inscriptions or documents that could help forward the modest scientific efforts then being made in France. In 1712, Paul Lucas published his [*Voyage du Sieur Paul Lucas fait par ordre du roy dans la Grece, l'Asie Mineure, la Macedoine et l'Afrique*](#), in which he reported that he met a dervish in Turkey who told him that the Philosopher's Stone prolongs life by a thousand years, with proof that he would have met Nicolas Flamel in India three years earlier. His wife Pernelle would not have died either in 1397, but would have settled in Switzerland, joined by her husband in 1418. Here is the entire story (page 98-112):

"I was at Broussa, in Natolia, and going to take the air with a person of distinction, came to a little mosque, which was adorned with gardens and fountains, for a public walk; we were quickly introduced into a cloister, where we found four dervishes, who received us with all imaginable civility, and desired us to partake of what they were eating, We were told, what we soon found to be true, that they were all persons of the greatest worth and learning ; one of them, who said he was of Uzbek Tartary, appeared to be more learned than the rest, and I believe verily he spoke all the principal languages of the world. After we had conversed in Turkish, he asked if I could speak Latin, Spanish, or Italian. I told him, if he pleased, to speak to me in Italian; - but he soon discovered, by my accent, that it was not my

mother tongue; and asked me frankly, what country I came from? As soon as he knew that I was a native of France, he spoke to me in as good French as if he had been brought up at Paris. "How long, Sir," said I, "did you stay in France?" He replied, he had never been there, but that he had a great inclination to undertake the journey." I did all in my power to strengthen that resolution, and to convince him that France was the nursery of the learned, and the King a patron of the sciences, who defrayed the expense of my travels, for collecting notices of antiquities, drawings of monuments, correcting maps, and making a collection of ancient coins, manuscripts, etc; all which he seemed to approve, out of pure civility. Our conversation being ended, the dervishes brought us to their house, at the foot of the mountain, where, having drank coffee, I took my leave, but with a promise, however, that I would shortly come and see them again." On the 10th, the dervish whom I took for an Uzbek, came to pay me a visit. I showed him all the manuscripts I had bought, and he assured me they were very valuable, written by great authors. He was a man every way extraordinary in learning; and in external appearance he seemed to be about thirty years old; but from his discourse, I was persuaded he had lived a century. He told me that was one of seven friends, who travelled to perfect their studies, and, every twenty year, they met at a place previously appointed. I perceived that Broussa was the place of their present meeting, and that four of them had arrived. Religion, and natural philosophy, took up our thoughts by turns; and at last we fell upon chemistry, alchemy, and the cabala. I told him all these, and especially the philosophers' stone, were regarded by most men of sense as mere fictions. "That," replied he, "should not surprise you; the sage hears the ignorant without being shocked, but does not for that reason sink his understanding to the same level. When I speak of a sage, I mean, one who sees all things die, and revive: he has more riches in his power than the greatest king, but lives temperately, above the power of events." Here I stopped him, "With all these fine maxims, the sage dies as well as other people." "Alas !" said he, "I perceive you are unacquainted with sublime science. Such a one as I describe, dies indeed, for death is inevitable, but he does not die before the utmost limits of his mortal existence. Hereditary disease and weakness reduced the life of man, but the sage, by the use of the true medicine, can ward off whatever may hinder or impair the animal functions for a thousand years." Surprised at all I heard, "And would you persuade me," said I, "that all who possessed the philosophers' stone, have lived a thousand years." He replied gravely, "Without doubt every one might; it depends entirely on themselves." At last I took the liberty of naming the celebrated Flamel, who it was said, possessed the philosophers' stone, but was dead. He smiled at my simplicity, and said, with an air of mirth, "And do you really believe this ?— No no, my friend, Flamel is living still; — neither he nor his wife are dead; It is not above three years since I left both the one and the other in the Indies; he is one of my best friends!" Upon which he told me the history of Flamel, as he heard it from himself, the same as I had read in his book;

until at last, when Charles VI, who was then upon the throne, sent M. Cramoisi, a magistrate, and his master of requests, to enquire from Flamel the origin of his riches, he saw at once the danger he was in; and shortly after spread a report of his wife's death; having sent her into Switzerland, to wait there for him, he had her funeral celebrated; and in a few years he ordered his own coffin to be interred. Since that time they have both lived a philosophic life, sometimes in one country, sometimes in another. This is the true history, and not what is believed at Paris, where there are very few who ever had the least glimpse of true wisdom.

The 1806 The Testament of Nicholas Flamel

The Testament of Nicholas Flamel was published in 1806, "printed by J. and E. Hodson, No. 15 Cross-street, Batton-Garden; and sold only by the editor." The editor claimed that he had received it from a Paris correspondent with a letter dated 28th of March, 1803. The man claimed to have translated the original Flamel testament from the old Latin into modern French.

After a short introduction and the entire text of *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques de Nicolas Flamel*, the editor then gives the the English and French versions of the testament on opposite pages. The testament does not contain the ordinary distribution of an inheritance to people or institutions, but instead it is an alchemical recipe for making the Powder of Projection, in typical symbolic and cryptic manner.

After this 'testament' is another page, on which the French correspondent added the following:

"This is what I find at the end of the Manuscript."

"They assert that the original of this work was written upon the margin of a vellum Psalm-book, in Nicholas Flamel's own handwriting in favour of his nephew. The process was written in cyphers, the better to conceal the secret. Each letter was shaped in four different ways, so that to make up the whole alphabet therewith 96 letters were employed. Father Perneti and Monsieur de S^t Marc deciphered this writing with much difficulty. M. de S^t Marc was on the point of giving it up; but Father Perneti, who had already found out the vowels, encouraged him to go on with the work, which they at last overcame, with complete success, about the year 1758."

Well, one has to make it mysterious by claiming that the testament was written in a difficult to decipher code. Father Perneti refers to Dom Perneti who fiercely defended the 1612 *Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques*. Dom Perneti never mentioned that he had deciphered a testament of Flamel, something he surely would have done.

The Testament is obviously another fraud, made an unknown 'correspondent', published by a not named editor of a publishing house.

The Real Nicholas Flamel

Le livre des figures hiéroglyphiques de Nicolas Flamel was published in 1612, which was basically a fictionalized story, based on already existing rumors that he was an alchemist. But who was the real Nicholas Flamel?

Nicolas Flamel was born around 1340, probably in Pontoise near Paris. He began a career in Paris as a copyist and public writer, in a small shop in the rue des Ecrivains behind the Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie church. He subsequently bought a house opposite the shop, at the corner of rue des Ecrivains and rue de Marivaux (renamed rue Nicolas-Flamel in 1851), in which he lived and set up his workshop. Probably after 1368, he became a juror (sworn because he had to take an oath at the University of Paris), a member of the privileged category of booksellers, parchment makers, illuminators, writers and book binders, all trades. These were people belonging to various sciences and known in the Middle Ages under the generic name of clerics. They depended on the University and not on the jurisdiction of the provost of Paris, like other merchants. In particular, they were exempt in principle from sizes (direct taxes). Flamel also tried to assert this privilege in 1415 to avoid paying a tax.

Around 1370, he married a twice widowed woman, Pernelle, and in 1372 they made a mutual bequest of their property before a notary, a gift which was renewed on several occasions, and which excluded Pernelle's inheritance from her sister and her children. Themselves childless, the two Flamel spouses began to finance pious works and constructions. In the 14th and 15th century, the bourgeois of Paris had the graves of the cemetery of the innocents exhumed, and the bones were piled up and put to dry, high above the arcs. In 1389, Nicolas Flamel had one of these arcs built and decorated, on the rue de la Lingerie side, where there were also shops of public writers. This arcade was painted with a black man representing death, the initials of Nicolas Flamel in Gothic letters, a poem and religious inscriptions, according to Guillebert de Mets in his *Description de Paris* (1434). The same year, Flamel financed the repair of the portal of the church of Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie, and depicted himself there in prayer with his wife, at the foot of the Virgin Mary, Saint James and Saint John.

Pernelle died in 1397. Just before her death, her family tried to cancel the mutual legacy between the spouses. A lawsuit ensued between the heirs of Pernelle's sister and Nicolas Flamel, which the latter ended up winning. After the death of his wife, he continued to finance devout constructions, and engaged in real estate investments in Paris and its surroundings. In 1402, he had the portal of the Sainte-Geneviève-la-Petite church rebuilt, which was located on the Île de la Cité, along the rue Neuve-Notre-Dame, on the site of the current "the forecourt of Notre-Dame parvis and place Jean-Paul-II. It was called Sainte-Geneviève-des-Ardents from the beginning of the 16th century and destroyed in 1747.



*Flamel as represented in 1402 on the portal of Sainte-Geneviève des Ardens
(from Étienne François Villain, 1761)*

Perenelle's statue, in a long hooded dress, and with the writing desk, symbol of her profession, was placed in a niche next to the portal. In 1411, he financed a new chapel at the Saint-Gervais hospital (which was opposite the Saint-Gervais church), and seems to have contributed to the renovations of the Saint-Côme and Saint-Martin-des-Champs churches. In 1407, he had a tomb erected for Pernelle in the Cemetery of the Innocents, on which he had an epitaph in verse engraved.

The same year, he had a new arcade built (the one that would mainly attract the attention of the alchemists), this time on the side of the mass grave in the rue Saint Denis, and had it decorated with sculptures. He was again represented there with his wife, in prayer at the foot of Christ, of Saint Peter and of Saint Paul, surrounded by angels, and with his initials NF in writing. Below was a frieze of five bas-reliefs depicting various conventional religious figures: a winged lion, angels, a resurrection scene, two fighting dragons, etc. Still below, three panels represented the Massacre of the Innocents, which gave its name to the cemetery. The iconography of these sculptures is similar to that of other funerary monuments in the cemetery of the Innocents. These constructions and ornamentations were common at the time.

Also in 1407, Flamel had several houses built to accommodate the poor, on which we saw "a number of figures engraved in the stones with a Gothic N and F on each side". The best known, and the only one that still exists today, is the house of Nicolas Flamel, also known as *Au Grand Pignon*, rue de Montmorency (today at no. 51). Now called *Nicolas Flamel's house*, although there is no indication that he has ever lived there, it is reputed to be one of the oldest residences in Paris.

Flamel also owned a number of houses in Paris and in the surrounding villages, some earning him rents, but others abandoned and in ruins. With the success of his activity as a copyist and bookseller, and the contribution of his wife Pernelle, twice widowed before marrying him, these real estate investments, made in the context of the economic depression of the Hundred Years' War, probably have contributed to his fortune.

Nicholas Flamel died on March 22, 1418, and was buried in the Church of Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie where his tombstone was installed near a pillar below an image of the Virgin. The church was destroyed at the end of the revolutionary period, around 1797. The tombstone was however preserved, and bought by an antique dealer from a fruit and vegetable seller in the rue Saint-Jacques-la-Boucherie, who used it as a stand for his spinach. Bought in 1839 by the town hall of Paris, it is currently in the Musée de Cluny, Paris.



Tombstone of Nicholas Flamel

Above the engraved inscription, Christ blesses and holds a cruciferous globe. It is depicted as a bust, framed by the sun and the moon as well as Saints Peter and Paul. At the bottom of the epitaph, the deceased is depicted in "transi", a type of funerary representation frequent at the end of the Middle Ages.

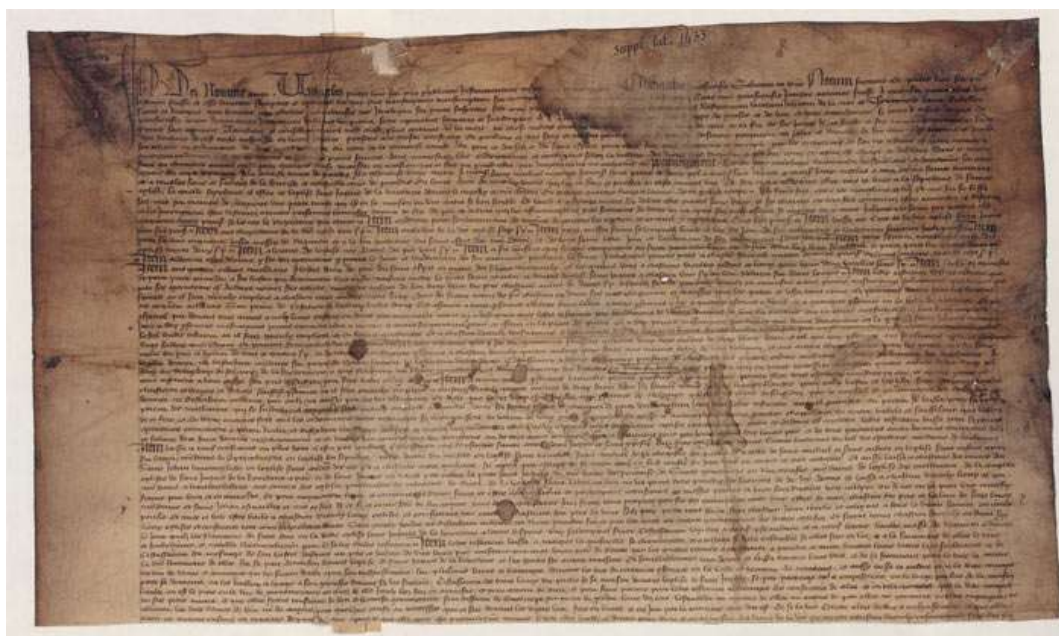
The Real Testament

The real testament of Nicholas Flamel is now in the [Bibliothèque nationale de France \(Département des manuscrits\)](#), Paris. It is dated 22 november 1416, handwritten in Latin, and described by the museum as being "3 pieces mounted

on tabs, including a folio cut-out roll 1-4380 × 270 mm. Natural half parchment."
Flamel's will is a distribution of his inheritance, like with all testaments. The will very much that of a meticulous businessmen. Nothing in it suggests that he was an alchemist.

In his will, Flamel gives detailed instructions for arranging his own funeral and it appears that he wishes to be remembered as an important citizen of Paris. The bell of the Tour Saint-Jacques opposite his house had to ring, he describes the solemn masses held, the number of torches lit, the prayers for the salvation of his soul, and so on. On the day of his burial and the day after, three hundred poor people were to be given quatre deniers (four silver coins). One hundred poor families were each given *du drap brun* (brown cloth) to make cloaks from. Flamel specifies that they are not allowed to sell it, on pain of returning the goods. Everything shows that a 'different' Flamel is speaking here than that of the legend: Nicolas Flamel as a businessman, who even wants to manage his affairs meticulously until after his death. In the will, Flamel stipulates which donations the churches receive, and he also ensures that "Margot La Quesnel sa chambrière" (chamber maid) and her daughter Colette are assured of a good future. Also striking is the resentment that he apparently continued to feel for the family of his deceased wife, whom he actually excludes from his estate and that of Perenelle. Nicolas really thinks of everything: the sums to be spent on the masses, the expenses for bread, wine, candles... After having settled all his debts, Flamel left everything to the church of Saint-Jacques: his furniture, his houses , are annuities and inheritances. In exchange for these generous gifts, he expects daily masses to be celebrated there, up to seven years after his death, that his grave be consecrated and that people pray for the salvation of his soul. In addition, a special Mass should be celebrated with that provided fund every year.

Part of Flamel's testament from the museum:





Discussion about the authenticity of Flamel being and alchemist, his riches, and manuscripts have been ongoing, and he has been the center of many new stories, both in esoteric circles and popular culture.