

Zosimos of Panopolis Biography

Zosimos of Panopolis

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Biography

Zosimos was an Egyptian who wrote a book on Alchemy in the fourth century A.D. There is not much more that can be observed about his life with any degree of certainty. He is mentioned in ancient books as a wise man and a mystical figure. These authors, writing centuries after he died, reported that Zosimos was born in Panopolis, Upper Egypt. One source refers to his home as Alexandria, where he is believed to have died. A famous alchemist associated with the holy place of Serapeum gave a book of Zosimos to the high priest there. However, the Serapeum was destroyed in 389 A.D. Thus, the time of Zosimos is established close to 300 A.D.

Many books attributed to Zosimos have been translated into Greek, Arabic, and French. However, the authenticity of these books is difficult to establish because of inaccurate and anachronistic references. The historically accepted figure of Zosimos is that of the author of a series of books on alchemy described in an ancient Arabic source. The books are addressed to Zosimos' sister, where the author attempts to warn her of her materialistic love for gold. Although Zosimos eventually capitulates to describing the apparatus and methods of alchemy, most of the books involve spiritual teachings. He believed that the transmutation of metals cannot come about without spiritual ceremony.

It is important for the student of chemistry to understand Zosimos because, in his writings, are the evidence and the origin of the mysticism inherent in ancient alchemy. This mysticism is what Paracelsus and Libavius warned against while attempting to transform chemistry into a branch of science. Interestingly, just as Zosimos entreated his sister to be more altruistic, Paracelsus and Libavius encouraged their students to use chemistry to serve others.