Recreating alchemical and other ancient recipes shows scientists of old were quite clever

August 5 2015

From "dragon's blood" to slippery elm root, coded and obscure ingredients of ancient recipes are getting a second look today not by Harry Potter fans, but by historians who want to experience science as it was practiced centuries ago. An article in *Chemical & Engineering News* (C&EN), the weekly newsmagazine of the American Chemical Society, explores some of the intriguing discoveries these recent efforts have yielded and the unexpected questions they raise.

Sarah Everts, a senior editor at C&EN, notes that most science historians had long derided alchemy as pseudo-science, and many assumed that scientists of old weren't particularly clever. And with recipe instructions such as "igniting the black dragon," it's no wonder. But a lot of persistence and detective work have revealed that some early scientists wrote their instructions in code as an early form of intellectual property protection. Historians have now figured out that dragon's blood refers to mercury sulfide, and igniting the black dragon likely means igniting finely powdered lead.

Resurrecting ancient recipes tells us that the science of long ago was far more sophisticated than previously believed. For example, it reveals that Romans from the 2nd century used nanoscience, if unknowingly, to dye their hair. And it raises bizarre questions. When re-creating a paint binder made out of eggs, one researcher asks, "Do we need to breed chickens with a diet consistent with 1552?"

More information: Reviving Ancient Recipes - cen.acs.org/articles/93/i31/Sc … Ancient-Recipes.html

Provided by American Chemical Society

Citation: Recreating alchemical and other ancient recipes shows scientists of old were quite clever (2015, August 5) retrieved 26 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2015-08-recreating-alchemical-ancient-recipes-scientists.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.