

ATRIUM TOUR

ALCHEMY

Bacon's alchemical pursuits were largely driven by the desire to find ways to prolong human life, even to extreme lengths. He envisioned that alchemy, particularly when combined with his understanding of medicine, could achieve this through the creation of potent and safe medicines.

Bacon distinguished between practical alchemy, which involved the manipulation of substances through techniques like distillation and sublimation, and speculative alchemy, which focused on understanding the fundamental nature of the four elements and their interactions.

Bacon believed that the four elements (fire, air, water, and earth) combined to form the four humors (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile). He thought that by understanding how these elements and humors interacted, one could manipulate them to create beneficial medicines and potentially achieve a state of incorruptibility – the idea that materials could be made resistant to decay. He believed that an "elixir" or medicine of equal complexion could restore a body's balance, making it resistant to disease and aging, and potentially even extending life.

Bacon's alchemical ideas were influenced by the medical practices of his time, particularly Galenic medicine, which focused on the balance of humors. He also drew inspiration from the Franciscan order's belief in the innate goodness of the physical body and the possibility of spiritual and physical union with God.

His *Opus Majus* suggests that alchemical wisdom would supply gold to fund armies and could devise large-scale weapons: diseases that spread through contact and might destroy an enemy without an army, or explosions of fire that burned even in water, or mirrors that could confound an enemy at a distance, or even incantations that might bring down heavenly power on an enemy's head. Many came from the *Secret of Secrets*, an advice manual for princes translated from the Arabic tradition, and these earned Bacon much of his later reputation as a conjuror.

Roger Bacon conducting an alchemical experiment in a vaulted cloister (right)

