Elements in Antiquity

The idea that matter is composed of a set of fundamental building blocks is ancient. All ancient systems were based on the idea of four elements: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water.

Greek philosophers are often considered to have expressed the first clear idea of elements. In fact, ancient cultures in India, China, and sub-Saharan Africa all independently developed the concept of elements as part of their natural philosophy.

Top: A 17th Century representation of the universe. The four classical elements are visible at the extremities of the circle.
Bottom: A representation of a cosmogram from the religion of the Kingdom of Kongo. The four classical elements are visible..