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ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS FROM THE WOOD LIBRARY-MUSEUM

Sertürner Isolates Morphine! And Eventually...Himself



Orphaned at age 15, Friedrich Wilhelm Sertürner (1783 to 1841, *right*) soon became a pharmacy apprentice at the court in Paderborn, Prussia. During his free time, he researched opium (*lower left*), the wondrous latex that oozed from scored poppy bulbs (*upper left*). While experimenting with a myriad of solvents in 1804, Sertürner discovered that ammonia applied to opium led to the formation of “completely colorless and regular” crystals. He named this pure alkali “morphium,” after Morpheus, the Greek god of dreams. When morphium relieved a toothache that opium could barely touch, Sertürner convinced three teenagers to help him explore its physical effects. After consuming a total of 90mg each, the four young men fell ill with “stomachache, weakness, and marked stupefaction bordering on unconsciousness.” Subsequent ingestion of vinegar provoked retching; constipation, stupor, and headache lingered for days. Sertürner reported his findings in an 1817 paper that captivated French chemist Joseph Louis Gay-Lussac, who renamed the substance “morphine” with the suffix “-ine” to herald the birth of the alkaloid class. With opium’s active ingredient now isolated, analgesia could be dosed incrementally. But while morphine decreased the risk of overdose from variably potent opium, it could still engender addiction. Sertürner himself became hooked on the drug and grew increasingly isolated with time. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists’ Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology. www.woodlibrarymuseum.org)

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