

■ ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS

Cordus' Synthesis of Ether



In 1540 Valerius Cordus (1515–1544; German botanist, pharmacist, and physician) synthesized ether (“sweet oil of vitriol”) in his alchemist’s still from ethanol (“triply-distilled” wine) and sulfuric acid (“sour oil of vitriol”). His “sweet” mixture floated on water (the volatile diethyl ether portion, which would be vaporized three centuries later as an anesthetic) yet felt greasy to touch (the aromatic diethyl sulfate portion). Hailed later as the Father of Descriptive Botany and of the Legally Sanctioned Pharmacopoeia, Cordus died, possibly from malaria, soon after the 29-year-old’s leg was kicked savagely by a horse. The world’s first record of the synthesis of ether, *De Artificiois Extractionibus*, was published 17 years later in a posthumous compilation. In July of 2009, the Wood Library-Museum acquired this “new” tome from 1561 (see above—note its pigskin-quarterbound, antiphonal-vellum-over-pasteboard covers). (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists, Inc. This image appears in color in the *Anesthesiology Reflections* online collection available at www.anesthesiology.org.)

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