

ORGYN

SPECIAL REPORT:
GYNAECOLOGIC ONCOLOGY

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THE TEMPTATION OF ST ANTHONY

THE ORIGINS OF SEXUAL REPRODUCTION:
WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

THE ANCIENT HISTORY OF CONTRACEPTION

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"It is intriguing to ponder why so few now know what so many once did." Thus does John Riddle describe the enigma of our rapidly dwindling knowledge of the natural chemical contraceptives in routine use from prehistory until the Renaissance.

55

The contemporary view holds that no woman could prevent conception by chemical means until modern science (in the form of the Pill) first made it possible. In his compelling book *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, John Riddle presents a dissenting opinion. He traces the little-known history of oral contraception and abortifacients (in the form of pessaries) back to prehistorical times.

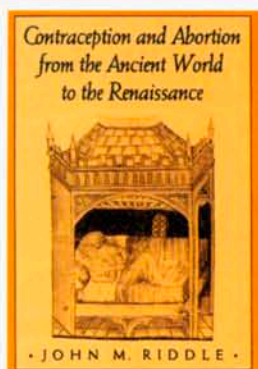
Most of the drugs derived from plants and used in Antiquity as oral contraceptives, such as pomegranate peel, rue and willow bark, have been shown by modern scientific research to have definite anti-fertility properties. As Riddle points out: "Some plants have the means of disrupting and/or desynchronizing one or another of the pre-ovulatory and pre-implantational events; they exert their anti-fertility effects through chemical classes known as estrogenic sterols, coumestrols and isoflavones, as well as through uterine contractors." Today, the plants known to possess these properties generally match those known in Antiquity, although many were re-discovered only recently. Riddle emphasizes that there has been a conspicuous discontinuity of knowledge in this regard, while many re-discoveries have yet to be made.

This discontinuity appears to be a modern phenomenon, however. Riddle points out that, at least until the Industrial Revolution, there was a remarkable continuity of knowledge stretching across several millenia. The substances used for chemical contraception and early abortion were passed along a chain of tradition from approximately 1900 BC to relatively contemporary tribal groups and rural communities. Substances mentioned in ancient Egyptian papyri also recur some 1,000 to 1,500 years later in the Hippocratic

writings of the Greeks. Riddle cites an example from ancient Egypt described in the Ebers Papyrus (1550-1500 BC): a vaginal suppository is prescribed in which, "if it is compounded and fermentation occurs, lactic acid anhydride is produced. Dissolved in water, lactic acid is liberated. Lactic acid is [currently] employed in contraceptive jellies in the United States and the United Kingdom." It may come as something of a surprise to learn that the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh and his wife were using essentially the same spermicidal jelly that can now be purchased at the corner drugstore. Riddle also outlines how oral contraceptives were responsible for the extraordinary population control practised during the time of the Roman Empire and during the late Middle Ages in Europe. The medieval

damsels who sprinkled generous amounts of rue on their salads, for example, were trying to limit the size of their families, just as the ancient Greeks were. For thousands of years, the midwife's tradition ensured that the correct substances were administered in the correct dosages in order

"to help those women who are so prolific that they stand in need of such respite," as Pliny put it. In yet another example Riddle relates that the coast of northern Africa was stripped bare of Giant Fennel near Cyrene during Antiquity because it was then considered the plant with the most effective anti-fertility properties. As a result, the plant became extinct long before the birth of Christ. Ironically, our knowledge of such naturally-occurring chemical contraceptives became extinct just as long before the birth of the modern pharmaceutical industry. With this book, John Riddle's salutary accomplishment has been to lift the bedspreads of antiquity to show us "fertility control" in progress, something that we thought we had invented. ■



Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance

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56