

Although there has been some debate about the proper etymology of the word retina, this author believes that the correct etymology is from the Latin “*rete*.” It is not clear, however, whether the word is ultimately a translation of the Greek word *amphiblestron* or the Arabic *al-shabakiyyah*.

Part of the confusion stems from what part of the eye Herophilus, a famous physician who practiced in Alexandria (c. 325–280 BC), referred to when he named the retina. Since all of Herophilus’ works have been lost, and we have to rely on quotations of him by later authors, there is no way to check his words directly. Rufus, another classical physician (fl. AD 98–117), indicated that, “The ancient name by which it [the retina?] is called is cobweb-like (*arachnoeides*), on account of its fineness. But Herophilus likens it to a casting net that is drawn up, some also call it ‘net-like’. Others call it ‘vitreous,’ too, on the basis of the liquid” (von Staden, 1989, p. 206). On the other hand, Celsus (25 BC–AD 50) writes that “Herophilus called the retina *arachnoidem*, cobweb-like” (von Staden, 1989, p. 206). Margaret May, in her translation of Galen’s (130–200) *De Usu Partium*, implies that Herophilus changed the name from *arachnoid* to *amphiblestron* (p. 25). In most of these accounts there is some confusion as to which layer of the eye is being referred to. Perhaps, also, Herophilus used both terms.

Assuming that Herophilus referred to this structure as *amphiblestron*, how do we get from this to “retina”? *Amphiblestron* derives from *amphibello*, which means “something thrown around.” In Greek, the word can refer to a garment, a net, an encompassment, or a fetter. According to the *Graceum Lexicon Manuale* by A. B. Hederico (1790), *amphiblestron* has three Latin translations: *rete*, *tunica*, and *munitio*. I suspect that *amphiblestron* was translated “*rete*” (which means “net”) instead of the more obvious and accurate “*tunica*.” From “*rete*,” it is a short etymological step to “retina.”

In his *Medical Etymology*, Perry Pepper combines all these into a probable etymology of this structure. He says, “[*Rete*] is probably the correct derivation, although there is no truly net-like structure in the retina. It probably came about as follows: Galen applied to the structure the Greek word *amphiblestron*, which had two [actually three] meanings, a surrounding coat [*tunica*] and a fisherman’s net [*rete*]. He used the word in the first sense; but when it was translated into Latin, the translator chose the second meaning and used the Latin word *rete*, net” (1949, p. 190).

Although I think that Pepper’s conjecture is substantially correct (except it was Herophilus, not Galen, who named the structure), Stephen Polyak argues that *rete* is a translation of the Arabic word for the retina: *al-shabakiyyah* (netlike). He argues that this translation is from Gherard of Cremona’s translation of *al-shabakiyyah* in ibn Sina’s *al-Qanun* (better known in the west as Avicenna’s *Canon*, 980–1037) from Arabic into Latin (Polyak, 1941, p. 146). Since Avicenna integrated a lot of Greek science into his works, we have the possibility that he independently picked an inapt translation of *amphiblestron*, using the Arabic word for “net.”

At this point, we are left with several unresolved issues, but we can also make some statements with a high degree of assurance. First, one uncertainty: was the original term for the retina “*arachnoidem*”? Putting this issue aside for the time being, it seems clear that the English word retina derives from the Latin “*rete*.” It is less clear, however, whether the Latin “*rete*” is an inapt translation from the Greek *amphiblestron* or the appropriate translation of the inappropriate Arabic word *al-shabakiyyah*.