

ACTIVITY 2C: THE ORIGIN OF BONE NAMES

STUDENT INFORMATION CARDS

BONE NAME CARDS—PAGE ONE

MAXILLA

Now restricted to the upper jaw, this Latin word was originally used by the Romans to designate both the upper and lower jaws. It is believed that this term comes from the Latin word *mala* or cheek, or that it is possibly related to the Latin word *macerare* meaning to chew.

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RIB

A shortening of the middle English word *iribbeî* which came from the Anglo-Saxon word *ribb* which originally meant a beam or a strip. Therefore the word *ribb* came to mean the beams or *ribs* of the chest. This word is related to the word *ribbon* in the sense of a narrow band.

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XIPHOID

This name is given to the cartilage of the sternum because of its sword-like shape. It is derived from the Greek words *xiphos*, a sword, and *eidos*, or like. The term was used by the early Greek anatomists.

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VERTEBRA

The old Latin term *vertebra* meant a joint or something to be turned and was derived from the Latin *verto* meaning to turn. Celsus, in about A.D. 30, used the term to designate any joint as well as a bone of the spine. It was only in later years that the term came to be restricted to a bone of the spine.

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RADIUS

The Latin term *radius* means a ray. It is also related to a Greek term meaning the spokes of a wheel or a rod. The rod-like bone of the forearm was therefore named from its shape which was thought to resemble a spoke of a wheel. The term was introduced by Celsus. The name does not seem to have appeared in English until the

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MANDIBLE

Now meaning the lower jaw, this term is derived from the Latin word *mandibulum* or jaw, which in turn was descriptively derived from the Latin word *mando* meaning to chew.

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PHALANGES

The small bones of the fingers and toes were named phalanges because they resembled the Greek line of battle formation called a *phalanx*. In the *phalanx* formation, soldiers formed close ranks and files with shields joined and long spears overlapping.

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SCAPULA

In Latin the plural form *scapulae* means the shoulder blades. In Greek, $\sigma\pi\lambda\theta$ means any broad, flat instrument, usually one made of wood like the blade of an oar. The name scapula was adopted by Vesalius. Riolan officially named it in 1640 translating from the Greek “ $\lambda\kappa\lambda\pi\tau\epsilon\upsilon$ ” meaning to dig because the bone resembled a digging tool.

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COCCYX

Herophilus named this “tail” bone in humans. He thought it resembled the bill of a cuckoo bird. An old name for the coccyx was “whistle-bone” because Riolan, 1620, thought the name was associated with the escape of wind making a noise like the cry of a cuckoo.

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SACRUM

In Latin, sacrum means sacred or holy. The sacrum was the last of the bones to decay after death, and that around it, the body would reassemble on the day of resurrection. In Greek it meant illustrious, glorious, mighty or great. It is suggested that the phrase was used by Galen because the sacrum was the greatest or most important bone of the spine. In 1732, Monro suggested it received this name because of its size in relation to the other vertebrae.

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FEMUR

Now called the thighbone, this Latin word used to mean the entire thigh. It is derived from the Latin words *fero* to bear, and *fertus* to be born. These words all stem from *feo* meaning to be fruitful or fertile and relate to the functions of the thighs in the bearing of children.

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SKULL

Coming from the Middle English word *skulle*, which in turn comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *scealu* meaning a cup, this name was applied to the skull because of its obvious resemblance to a cup or bowl. Similar words appear in other languages such as the Icelandic *skal* or bowl and the Swedish *skull* or *skoll*.

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FIBULA

This Latin word designates a buckle, brooch, or clasp. It is derived from the Latin word *figo* meaning to fasten. The relationship of the fibula to the tibia is that of the needle or pin of a brooch, the fibula being the needle. It was Vesalius who introduced fibula into anatomical terminology.

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PATELLA

The knee cap or patella takes its name from its resemblance in shape to a small dish or frying pan. The word *patella* is a Latin form of *patina* a broad shallow dish or pan. Related to this term is the Italian word for frying pan which is *padella*. The term was introduced into medicine by Celsus.

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CLAVICLE

The collar bone was named from its resemblance to an ancient key. The term is derived from the Latin word *clavis* or key. Aristotle said *clavis* is an instrument for closing and signifies the bone which closes the thorax.

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TIBIA

This is a Latin word meaning the shinbone and also a pipe or flute. Tibia could be a form of *tubia*, from *tuba*, a tube or pipe. Primitive musical instruments were made from reeds, horns, and the shin bones of birds. It is believed that the flute was named after the bone from which it was made. The use of the term in medicine is attributed to Celsus.

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CARPUS

This Latin word for the wrist is derived from the Greek word *karpos* or wrist. This in turn may stem from the Greek word *karphos* meaning splinters or bits of wood. This indicates that in Ancient times people named the small bones of the wrist from their resemblance to bits or splinters of wood. The term is very ancient and was used by Homer.

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PELVIS

This term comes from the Latin term *pelvis* which means a basin. The Latin word stems from the Greek word *PELLA* which is a dish or bowl. The term was used in Ancient times and reintroduced into anatomy by Vesalius in 1539 and became popular when Realdus Columbus used it in 1559.

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***The information for the "BONE NAME CARDS" was taken from the following sources:
Skinner, Henry Alan. *Origin of Medical Terms*. The Williams and Wilkins Co., 1961.
Wain, Harry. *The Story Behind the Word: Some Interesting Origins of Medical Terms*.
Springfield, Illinois: Thomas, 1958.