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MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

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Timekeeping: socio-political
and cultural aspects

The Islamic world developed distinct traditions for measuring and recording durations, and these traditions served to construct time as thoroughly Islamic. Far from being a simple act of measurement applied to some “natural,” pre-existing entity, **timekeeping** is one of the main ways by which social time is produced and maintained. Keeping time is always entangled with considerations of knowledge (what is time? what is the “true time?”) and power (who sanctions true time? who has access to true time?). Timekeeping appears to be a purely technical skill applied to a natural sphere, but in fact it produces time, a construct that is always culture-dependent; it is a set of socially created protocols that are always embedded in particular cosmologies, theologies, philosophies, and specific historical circumstances. Furthermore, the reckoning of the time of day has to be understood as part of a more comprehensive temporal system that encompasses epochal and calendric aspects as well (on these, see

De Blois; Stowasser, 14–30; Blake, *Time*, 48–173).

The first studies of timekeeping in the Islamic world focused mostly on the sphere of ritual, scientific theory, and instrumentation. The focus on Islamic astronomical timekeeping (*mīqāt*, see below) directed attention to early and mediaeval Islam, when this tradition was formed. While these studies contributed immensely to our understanding of particular traditions and instruments, they paid little attention to the wider world of economy, politics, and culture. Until the 2010s, there was almost no work done on time beyond studies on the tiny circle of astronomers who concerned themselves with timekeeping, or on periods later than the tenth/sixteenth century, when the *mīqāt* tradition seems to have stagnated. In the few studies that did cover later developments, either implicitly or explicitly, the Western, modern mode of timekeeping was taken as the universal norm against which other modes of timekeeping were measured. Like many other non-European temporalities, “Islamic time” was conceived within a binary framework, as