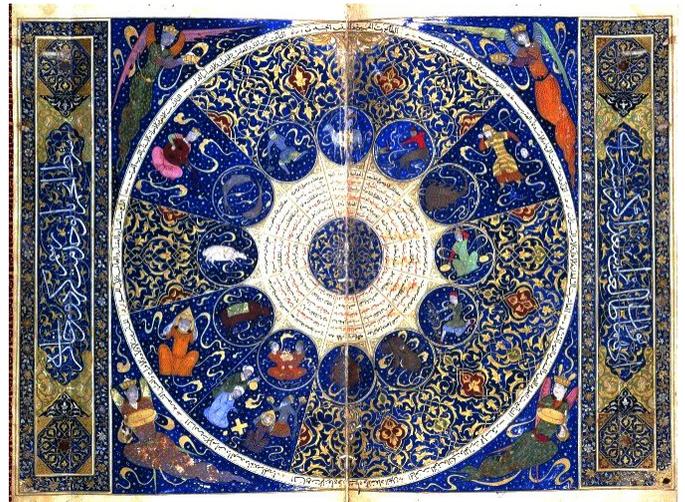


Muslim Heritage and the Night Sky

THE SKY, ESPECIALLY THE NIGHT SKY, IN ISLAMIC TRADITION IS CONSIDERED VERY IMPORTANT. IT IS USED TO NOT ONLY TO REFLECT ON GOD'S GLORY BUT TO DETERMINE MANY IMPORTANT EVERYDAY PRACTICES AND TRADITIONS OF THE ISLAMIC FAITH. GOD ASKS MANKIND TO "OBSERVE AND REFLECT" FOR SIGNS OF HIS EXISTENCE THROUGH THINGS MAN CAN OBSERVE VIA NATURE, SKY, THEIR LIVES AND OTHER OBSERVATIONS, IN PARTICULAR TO THE SKY AND MORE SPECIFICALLY THE NIGHT SKY. IT IS USED FOR VARIOUS PRACTICES IN ISLAM.



The horoscope of Iskandar Sultan, a 15th century Iranian ruler. Horoscope depicts planetary position on the day of Iskandar's birth, April 25th, 1384. Courtesy of The Wellcome Library, London, UK.

LUNAR CALENDAR

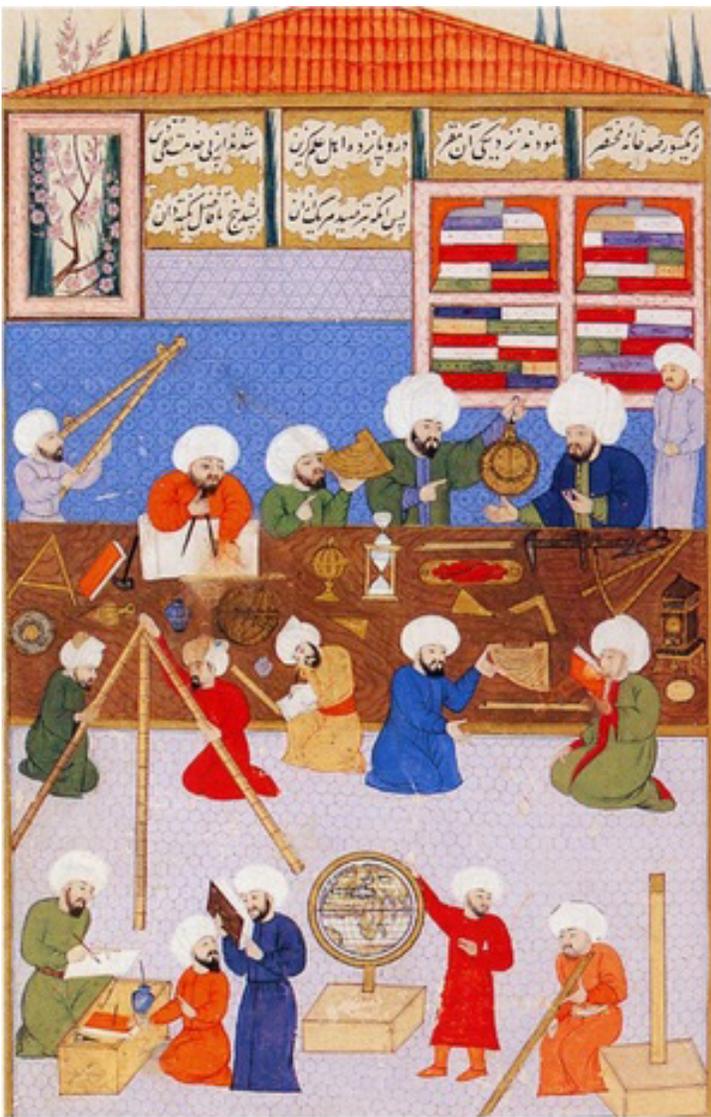
Lunar calendar is used to determine the year and special events take place according to this calendar. Phases of the moon determine the days and the lunar calendar is 29/30 days depending on the sighting of the moon. Today, Muslim communities will use calculations completely, while other communities will use calculations to determine the 29th of every month, and then go out to observe and confirm the sighting of the New Moon, see below:

Moon phases are observed regularly on a monthly basis to determine the next month of the calendar. In North America, council is put together by each community to determine the sighting of the moon. This is called the Hilal committee (moonsighting committee). They use calculations to determine when the 29th of each month should be, then go out those nights to confirm sightings of the new moon which helps determine if the next month can be announced. The months are important and significant in various religious practices such as: Important Annual Celebrations: Eid ul Fitr, Eid ul Adha and Important religious months : Ramadan (month of fasting), Dhul-Hujjah for Hajj (Pilgrimage to Mecca), etc.

It is a tradition in many Muslim communities for families to go out during the evening at the end of Ramadan to sight the moon together as a family, even when the communities are basing their Lunar Calendar on calculations alone. The tradition is a joyous one, on the night before Eid celebrations.

NAVIGATION + MAPPING + DETERMINING THE QIBLAH

The night sky was important for determining the direction of prayer (Qiblah). It still is used by the bedouins today. In the daytime, they use the sun to determine direction, and in the night, the stars. If they could not see the stars, they would be lost. So it was important to be able to know the brightest stars, and where they would be located during the night. Early Greek observers of the sky, believed that the Earth was the center of the universe. The early Muslim scholars did not believe this and tried to prove it was wrong. They built observatories to watch the night sky. Prayer times are determined by the sun's position, five times a day. Below are some verses from the Quran indicating that sun, moon and sky are an important part of the Islamic faith and that their importance is not only used for determining prayer time, or the passage of months as mentioned above, but also for humans to reflect on God's creations and on our purpose as humans. All so that they can recognize God by these creations.



Verily, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the succession of night and day, there are indeed messages for all who are endowed with insight, - 3:190

[He is] the One who causes the dawn to break; and He has made the night to be [a source of] stillness, and the sun and the MOON to run their appointed courses: [81] [all] this is laid down by the will of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. - 6:96

and has made the sun and the MOON, both of them constant upon their courses, subservient [to His laws, so that they be of use] to you; and has made the night and the day subservient [to His laws, so that they be of use] to you. [46] - 14:33

and [fail to see that] it is He who has created the night and the day and the sun and the MOON - all of them floating through space! - 21:33

Most Blessed and Most Glorified is He Who made vast mansions of heavenly spheres (in the form of galaxies) in the heavenly cosmos and made (the sun) in it a (light-generating and heat-emitting) lamp and a shining moon (in the solar system) 25:61

The Lord of the heavens and the earth and whatever (creation) is between them, and the Lord of every point of sunrise 37:5

Surely, We have adorned the world's heaven (the first heavenly sphere) with the adornment of stars and planets 37:6

And from among His Signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Prostrate yourselves not to the sun" nor to the moon, but prostrate yourselves to Allaah Who created them, if you (really) worship Him 41:37

Muslim Astronomers in Taqi-al-Din
Ala ad-Din Mansur-Shirazi -
Istanbul Ala ad-Din Mansur-Shirazi -
Istanbul University Library, F 1404, fol. 57a
(Sehinsename, Book of the King of King University Library, F 1404,
fol. 57a