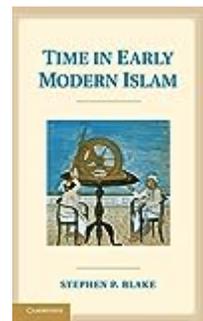




**Stephen P. Blake.** *Time in Early Modern Islam: Calendar, Ceremony, and Chronology in the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman Empires.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. xiii + 209 pp. \$94.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-03023-7.



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**Published on** H-War (January, 2016)

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A recent trend in early modern historiography centers on empire building and the construction of imperial identities, which had to accommodate local conditions and traditions. These studies have often employed comparative history to explore empire building on the global scale. In most cases, these comparative approaches tend to be cross-confessional, for example, comparisons of the Muslim Ottoman Empire to the Christian Venetian *Stato da mar* or the Portuguese Empire. Stephen P. Blake's latest study employs the comparative method but abandons the traditional cross-confessional approach, opting instead to compare the notions of time in the three Islamic empires of the early modern world: the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal.

Blake's fascinating and lucid investigation furthers our understanding of early modern Islamic empires and empire building more generally by suggesting that the historiographical truism of Islamic empires ought to be revised; in turn, it reconfigures how we see religious ritual and ceremony and their roles in constructing imperial ideologies. In this vein, Blake argues that the potentates in each of the three empires constructed time according to both Islamic and local concepts of calendars, ceremonies, and chronology in order to consolidate power and construct particular brands of Islamic impe-

rial ideology that fit the expectations of both the ruling elites and the subjects of these multiethnic empires. His claim that while there are many ways of approaching the topic of time, the social or cultural point of view is the one that is taken here points to his argument that time in early modern Islam was not purely scientifically veritable but rather was the product of social, cultural, and political expectations that varied widely across the three empires (p. 2). While it is hardly groundbreaking to say that time and the scientific investigation of it by astrologers, astronomers, and clerics were employed in accordance to cultural expectations and political design—studies on topics ranging from the priestly class in the Roman Republic to ritual in Renaissance Italy have addressed this—the significance of Blake's contribution is his assessment of how each Islamic empire viewed time in very different terms and appropriated it according to evolving needs and expectations. This unsettles traditional, but clearly outmoded, notions of Islamic empires as somehow static when viewed against their European counterparts.

Each chapter of the work explores a different facet of how time was constructed across all three empires. The introductory chapter gives a concise overview of the book's central goals as well as a broad sketch of the his-

tory of time in Islam, from Muhammad until the advent of the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman empires. The second chapter gives a useful overview of the history of the three empires and provides needed context for understanding the nuances of governance that each empire faced. The book explores in turn calendars, ceremonies, and chronology. Finally, the conclusion includes a comparison of Blake's findings with the concepts of time in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The reader will find chapters 3 through 5 of particular interest, as they articulate how the Islamic calendar (*hijra*) was an important element of building Islamic imperial identities. Yet Blake's contention that each empire had to deviate from or rely on the *hijra* at varying degrees due to tensions between adhering to Islam and not abandoning Zoroastrian (Safavid), Indic (Mughal), and Romano-Judeo-Christian (Ottoman) traditions demonstrates that empire building hinged on reconciling localized expectations with the imperial rhetoric of Islam. The chapters on calendars and ceremony illustrate this point most forcefully. For example, while the Safavids added a Shi'ite ingredient to their *Nau Reuz* [Zoroastrian New Year] celebration, the ceremony was intended, for the most part, to underscore the dynasty's claim to the pre-Islamic Iranian tradition of divine kingship (p. 84). The Ottomans, contrarily, were right not to try to deviate from ceremonies tied to the *hijra* because of their self-image as successors to the divinely guided caliphs (p. 139).

Likewise fascinating is Blake's evidentiary base, ranging from the treatises of astronomers and astrologers to administrative documents concerning taxes and governance, which demonstrate that these empires' leaders were preoccupied with understanding and controlling time in order to govern their empires. Equally impor-

tant, therefore, is the tension between the maintenance of the *hijra* and the practicalities of governing large, diverse empires. In each empire, adjustments had to be made to carry out basic tasks, such as paying troops and collecting taxes. Time could also threaten the stability of an empire, as the chapter on prophets and millenarian chronology shows. This reconciliation like others was not uniform in the three empires. The Safavids and Mughals, because of the Zoroastrian and Indic traditions and the multi-ethnic composition of the Mughal adjusted their calendars more readily than the Ottomans, who could not so easily deviate from the *hijra* due to their claim to the caliphate. Yet the Ottomans were more concerned with mechanized timekeeping, stemming in part from their ties to the Greco-Roman past and their economic connections with European clockmakers.

In sum, Blake's book is a fascinating exploration of how early modern empire building was far more complex than the application of an imperial ideology that hinged on a pure religious identity. Rather, as evidenced through three distinct applications of time and ceremony in building Islamic empires, empire building was a recursive reconciliation of the ideology of the metropole with local conditions and expectations that allowed for the intersection of unique cultures in areas of commerce and the exchange of ideas. While the ruling elite of each of the three empires in Blake's study saw itself as the power base of an Islamic empire, all three empires were nevertheless the successors of the preceding cultures that they conquered and were subsequently compelled to use localized cosmopolitan constructions and understandings of time to ossify the reality of their power and to secure the viability of their empires.

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**Citation:** Robert John Clines. Review of Blake, Stephen P., *Time in Early Modern Islam: Calendar, Ceremony, and Chronology in the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman Empires*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

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