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Nasṭūlus: Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh

Mònica Rius

Alternate name

Basṭūlus

Flourished **10th century**

Nasṭūlus is credited with constructing two astrolabes. The first, dated 927/928, is considered the oldest surviving astrolabe (though not the first ever constructed). This elegant instrument is preserved in the Kuwait Museum of Islamic Art. It has a single plate (for latitudes 33° and 36°) on the back of which are four quadrant scales and a shadow scale. The throne bears the inscription, “Made by Nasṭūlus (or Basṭūlus) in the year 315.” The second astrolabe, of which only the *mater* is still extant, bears no date but was probably constructed around 312 hijra (925). It is preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo; the inscription “Made by Nasṭūlus” appears on the throne. It contains the earliest and only geographical list to appear on an instrument before *circa* 1100. The purpose of the gazetteer on the *mater* is evidently to show which plates should be used in different cities. Most of the latitudes included are derived from **Khwarizmi**’s geographical table, although the remainder may have been taken from other early sources such as **Battānī** (*circa* 910). Although no original plate has survived, the instrument has various Mamluk additions, dated 1314.

We know almost nothing about this astronomer, and even his name remains in doubt. Some historians have interpreted the manuscripts to refer to someone with a Greek name, perhaps Βατύλος/βαθύλος or Απόστολος. However, it is unclear whether he is a Muslim or Christian. King claims that he was a Muslim based on the testimony of the 10th-century astronomer **Sijzī**, who states that a certain Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh (clearly a Muslim name), known as Nasṭūlus, was the first person to design the astrolabe with a crab-shaped rete. Sijzī adds that Nasṭūlus also invented the hours drawn on the face of the alidade and the operation with the azimuth on the back of the astrolabe. This statement was later repeated by **Bīrūnī** in his *Istī‘āb*, in which he adds that Nasṭūlus was one of the people who worked on instruments for determining eclipses. On the other hand, M. Hinds suggests Nasṭūlus might refer to the Christian sect of the Nestorians, and Kunitzsch points out that the form Nasṭūrus was attested in 10th-century Egypt, and was used by Christian men. Nasṭūlus would then be just another form of Nasṭūrus.

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