

TSI SEMINARS - FALL 2026

24: The hour unit in Ancient Egypt

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(Rutherford 103)



Abstract: *Where does the notion of 24 hours come from? This talk traces the origins of the hour in ancient Egypt over a period of two and half thousand years of pharaonic history. We look at texts, tables, and instruments that give clues to how the now-ubiquitous time unit was developed. Evidence comes from a variety of aspects of Egyptian life: language, funerary practices, technical documentation or ‘textbooks’, a record of the invention of a type of timekeeping device, and the decorative program of a building designed to embody the origin of time itself: the Osireion at Abydos. The surviving record is patchy, with a strong bias towards elite and ritual practices rather than everyday life. However, a narrative is proposed that partially addresses the overarching question of why we today employ 24 divisions of the solar day.*