

Heavenly Lines  
JavaScript-Generated Astrolabes for  
Celestial Navigation on Faraway Worlds

An astrolabe is a sophisticated instrument used to measure the altitude of celestial bodies above the horizon. Serving across Classical Antiquity, the Islamic Golden Age, the European Middle Ages, and the Age of Discovery as an analog calculator for identifying stars and planets, determining local latitude from time (and vice versa), and performing surveying and triangulation, it functioned as both an observational tool and a computational device.

The first universal astrolabe was invented by Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Zarqali (b. 1029). His "Tablet of al-Zarqālī" projected both the equatorial and ecliptic coordinates onto a vertical plane intersecting the celestial sphere at the solstices, enabling use at any latitude. Known in Europe as "Saphe Azarchelis," it entered university curricula by the late 15th century.

Trained as a metalsmith, al-Zarqālī refined trigonometric tables, calculated the ecliptic's obliquity, and mapped stereographic projections. Remarkably, he described planetary orbits as elliptical centuries before Kepler. Copernicus cited him in "De Revolutionibus," and Chaucer noted the practical importance of astrolabe skills in his treatise on the instrument.

Inspired by al-Zarqālī, I sketched astrolabes for eighteen celestial bodies, applying NASA data to capture variations in axial tilt, orbital period, and rotational period. Initiated during my 2017-2020 MIT Fellowship in the course "Recreate Experiments from History," the digital artifacts were drawn in p5.js, a JavaScript library for creative coding, and exhibited in MIT's Wiesner Student Art Gallery.

This exploration demonstrates how astrolabes can provide navigational and temporal orientation beyond Earth, offering both a tribute to al-Zarqālī's enduring ingenuity and a computational tool for future interplanetary travel.

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Available for exhibition, publication, and collaboration.

