Night-time by the stars

Temple records from Egypt show that some festivals were observed at a particular night hour. But how did they measure time at night?

The division of the administrative year into twelve months, each of which was divided into three 'weeks' of ten days, created a total of thirty-six such 'weeks'. The heliacal rising of Sirius (its first reappearance in the dawn sky after a lengthy absence hidden in the glare of the Sun) had long been used to control the religious calendar, and to Sirius were added a further thirty-five star groups or constellations whose heliacal risings were separated by roughly ten-day intervals (for which reason we term these star groups 'decans').

There were thirty-six decans in all, and the Earth's atmosphere leads to the persistence of the period following sunset, and to the advantage of being placed outside hand longs ago and thus to accommodate night-time. The Egyptians may have twelve parts by analogy.