

The Law of the Imams: Reconstructing Early Legal Thought in the Shi'i Milieu

Universiteit Leiden, Netherlands

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This workshop aims to bring together scholars of early Shi'ism and Islamic legal studies to advance the study of early Imāmī Shi'i law; specifically, the legal positions attributed to the Shi'i Imams who lived between the first/seventh and third/ninth centuries and who went on to become canonised as Imams in the Twelver Shi'i tradition. Even among other legal traditions who did not necessarily consider these Imams to be 'Imams' in the same sense as they were for the Imāmīs, they were nevertheless held to be some of the finest legal minds of their time with their ideas holding a lasting impression upon broader Islamic legal thought.

Despite the importance of these Imams for the formation and development of Islamic law in general, attention devoted to their legal thought has thus far been limited. Many studies dealing with a certain topic in Imāmī law simply gloss over the legal positions attributed to the Imams on their way to a detailed analysis of the topic among jurists in the later Imāmī tradition. A comprehensive understanding of Imāmī teachings during this formative period thus remains a desideratum. This workshop aims to take one step towards rectifying this by generating sustained attention on the legal positions attributed to the Imams to attempt to reconstruct what their legal thought may have looked like. This will not only greatly improve our understanding of the development of Imāmī Shi'ism, but also our understanding of how minority groups such as the Imāmīs operated during the Umayyad and 'Abbasid periods.

Part of the reason for the lack of attention on early Imāmī law may be due to a certain apprehensiveness of the sources. Although some of the Imams are recorded as having authored works, apart from a few spurious attributions, none of these works have survived. Unlike jurists outside of the Imāmī context who were contemporary to them, some of whose works remain extant, the legal positions of the Imams are mostly preserved in hadith compilations of the third/ninth to fifth/eleventh centuries, albeit based on much earlier material. As such, the Imāmī corpus is afflicted with problems surrounding the dating of the reports and how best to establish their historicity. Nevertheless, there have been steps in the right direction in recent years with innovative methods proposed to establish firmer grounds for the historicity of the material, or at the very least, to trace the material back earlier than some have claimed it to originate from. A

further aim of this workshop is thus to encourage the continued development of innovative methodologies for approaching this material across Imāmī, Zaydī, Ismāʿīlī, and Sunni sources.

The workshop proposes a thematic approach whereby each participant focuses on a specific topic of law as espoused in the statements attributed to the Imams. The aim of this is to allow each topic to receive sustained attention and to bring the nuances of their legal thought to the fore. Participants will be encouraged to contextualise the theme they choose to examine within its wider social context and in conversation with the writings of jurists from other traditions who were contemporary to the Imams in order to gauge whether political, polemical, or economic factors may have had a role in shaping the positions taken.

ABSTRACT SUBMISSION

Please send an abstract of no more than 250 words and a 100-word biography to Adam Ramadhan (a.a.a.h.ramadhan@hum.leidenuniv.nl) by 25 October 2026. The abstract should include what legal topic you propose to discuss at the workshop, the time period you intend to focus on, whether you are focusing on the legal thought of a single Imam or on how a single legal issue evolved within the tradition, and what interventions you anticipate making based on the material.

WORKSHOP FORMAT

The workshop is centred around the reading and discussion of pre-circulated primary Arabic sources. Each participant will be allocated one hour in the programme. The material chosen should include no more than 10 pages of primary Arabic sources pertaining to their chosen topic but may also be accompanied by published work or a draft of work-in-progress pertaining to the primary material. Participants will be asked to begin their session with a 10-minute contextualisation of the material which will then be read and discussed collectively. We are keen to avoid traditional presentations so as to facilitate focused attention on the material itself.

WORKSHOP LOGISTICS

The workshop will take place in-person at Universiteit Leiden between 10 and 11 June 2027. There will be no provision for online participation. Lunches and one dinner on the first night of the workshop will be provided. Depending on final numbers, there may be support to cover the cost of travel and/or accommodation for participants.

CONTACT DETAILS

The main point of contact for this workshop is Adam Ramadhan who can be reached at a.a.a.h.ramadhan@hum.leidenuniv.nl.

ORGANISATION

This workshop is organised by Adam Ramadhan under the auspices of the ERC Horizon Starting Grant project 'Embodied Imamate: Mapping the Development of the Early Shi'i Community 700-900 CE' (grant no. 101077946) led by Edmund Hayes at Universiteit Leiden and with the generous support of the Juynboll Stichting.