

Lecture Series:

# Material Culture, Art, and Architecture of Pre-Safavid Shī'ism

Organised by Aila Santi & Edmund Hayes

Scholarship on Islamic art, architecture, and material culture has traditionally privileged Sunni contexts, resulting in substantial scholarly emphasis on the artistic, architectural, and material practices associated with Sunni dynasties and regions. In contrast, artistic expressions and material culture emerging from Shī'ī milieus—particularly those predating the 16th century—remain significantly understudied, with the exception of work on the Fatimid caliphate of Cairo. Scholars of the textual tradition of early Shī'isms pay scant attention to material contexts, and specialists of art, architecture and archaeology are often not aware of developments in textual studies. Addressing these gaps, the ERC-funded project *Embodied Imamate: Mapping the Development of the Early Shī'ī Community* at Leiden University is pleased to announce a lecture series that brings together experts in material culture, archaeology, art, architecture, and spatial analysis associated with the early Shī'a. The primary aim is to bring pre-Safavid Shī'ī milieu to the forefront of studies on Islamic art and material culture. Moving beyond a strictly formalist framework by incorporating insights from Shī'ī theology, jurisprudence, and devotional traditions, this series seeks to deepen scholarly understanding of the materiality of early Shī'ī identity and reassess foundational questions about the identification and definition of Shī'ī art. It will showcase the ways in which material contexts can be a site for the performance of religious identity. The question of what makes Shī'ī art distinctly Shī'ī—and whether specific forms or subjects can indeed be identified as such—is a persistent problem in the scholarship on Islamic art and archaeology. While the debate on “What is Shī'ī art?” is important, we must move beyond mere semantics, to explore new methodological pathways, and offer fresh insights into the materiality of early Shī'ī identity.

## Program (2025)\*

**March 28th, 15:30 CET:** Aila Santi (Leiden University)

*Early Shī'ī Sacred Topographies: Some Preliminary Considerations on Kufa and Medina*

**April 16th, 15:30 CET:** Mohamad Reza Ghiasian (Kashan University)

*Pre-Safavid Shī'ite Material Culture from Kashan*

**May 21st, 15:30 CET:** Hamidreza Azarinia (University of Tehran)

*Debate and Dialogue: Polemics, Kalam, and the Artistic Inscription in Islamic Spaces*

**June 25th, 15:30 CET:** Teresa Bernheimer (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich)

*Carved in Stone? Shii Funerary Inscriptions and Religious Identity in early Islamic Egypt*

**July 16th, 15:30 CET:** James Allan (Oxford University)

*The art of Shi'ism in the pre-Safavid period: avenues or cul-de-sacs?*

The series will run monthly from March to December 2025 on Zoom, on Wednesdays or Fridays at 15:30 CET. To attend, please register by emailing:

[a.santi@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:a.santi@hum.leidenuniv.nl)

\*The Autumn program will be announced soon. Updates will be shared on the Embodied Imamate project's official LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook channels.



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