The School of Hillah in Islamic History
Aun Hasan Ali (Religious Studies, CU Boulder)

The School of Ḥillah (and the formation of an Imāmī Shīʿī madhhab) is intertwined with the wider history of the region. I argue that particular relationships of power played as much of a role in shaping the Imāmī Shīʿism of Ḥillah as did individual scholars and curricular texts. To that end, this chapter provides readers with the essential historical context in which the School of Hillah arose and held the reins of Imāmī Shīʿism for more than 200 years. The chapter comprises four sections: the Saljūqs and late ʿAbbāsids; the Ilkhānids; the Jalāyirids and Qarā-Qoyūnlū; and the Mazyadids and Ḥillah. In the first three sections, the political history of the region is narrated from the vantage point of Baghdad and Lower Iraq. A major theme running through these sections is that, while the Saljūqs succeeded in reestablishing the political supremacy of Sunnism after the conclusion of “the Shīʿī century,” Shīʿism and Shīʿī ideals gradually gained currency on the ground, culminating in a series of explosive messianic movements in the 9th/15th century. The Mongol invasion and Ilkhānid rule were the most important factors driving this complex historical process, but it was aided by political, social, and cultural dynamics that emerged in the early middle period of Islamic history and persisted long after the demise of the Ilkhānate. In the fourth and final section of the chapter, I zoom in on the history of Hillah itself, paying particular attention to the religious topography of the city, including formal institutions of learning and sacred geography. To show readers how the School of Hillah shaped and was shaped by the gradual transformation of the region, I highlight important connections between the School of Hillah and the history of the period throughout the chapter. I conclude the chapter by arguing that, over the course of this tumultuous history, the School of Ḥillah succeeded in institutionalizing a framework for coherence that guided the trajectory of Imāmī Shīʿism and projected stability in a way that the ruling dynasties of the Shīʿī century never could.