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# MEDIATING COLONIAL ECOLOGIES: A POSTCOLONIAL, ECO-TRANSLATIONAL READING OF GERTRUDE BELL'S *MESOPOTAMIA* (1920)

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**Abstract**: This study examines the intersections of translation, ecology, and colonialism through a 1920 colonial report authored by Gertrude Bell (1868–1926), archaeologist, intelligence agent, and British administrator. Written amidst debates over the British Mandate for the former Ottoman *Vilayets* of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, *Mesopotamia*: *Review of the Civil Administration* translates colonial "Otherness" into Western codes of representation, and shapes a complex geographic, cultural, and linguistic ecosystem while framing British administrative restructuring as both necessary and desirable. The report is approached as an act of intersemiotic translation, transforming territorial mapping into textual form. The study also addresses a recent critical edition and Italian translation of *Mesopotamia* (Bell 2025), which introduces Bell's *magnum opus* to Italian readers. It reflects on the numerous linguistic and ethical implications of translating a text deeply rooted in colonial history and considers what it means today to engage with the colonial archive through critical methodologies attentive to its factual, semiotic, and translational dimensions.

**Keywords**: Gertrude Bell; Iraq; translation studies; postcolonial studies; ecocriticism; eco-translation; colonial reports.

## *1. Introduction: Converging Paradigms in Translation Studies, (Post)Colonial Studies, and Ecocriticism*

Within the field of translation studies, colonialism is certainly one of the most extensively examined concepts and frameworks for analysis. Postcolonial approaches to translation have been instrumental in casting light on the symbolic nexus between language, culture, and power, demonstrating how Western translation practices not only accompanied but actively facilitated and sustained colonial expansion (Niranjana 1992; Rafael 1993; Cheyfiz 1997; Bassnett and Trivedi 1999; Tymoczko 1999; Shamma 2009, 2018; Cheyfitz and Harmon 2018). By integrating cultural, historical, anthropological, and sociological perspectives, postcolonial translation studies demonstrate how the history of colonial interactions has been marked by political inequalities, of which translation has been not merely a reflection but a primary tool. Translation has thus been approached both as a textual practice and as a metaphor for understanding cross-cultural negotiations in colonial contexts (Pratt 1992; Bhabha 1994; Young 2012), thereby underscoring its dual function: domesticating and subordinating the foreign to the settler regime, while simultaneously alienating Indigenous subjects from their own cultural frameworks through processes of derealization, fictionalization, and objectification (Cheyfitz and Harmon 2018: 278).

In recent years, various approaches to postcolonial studies have underscored the intrinsic link between environmental concerns and postcolonial critiques of colonialism, power, and globalisation. As Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, since the challenges posed to the humanities by globalization and climate change are inextricably intertwined, "postcolonial thinking may need to be stretched to adjust itself to the reality of global warming" (2012: 1). In this vein, concepts like "green postcolonialism" (Huggan and Tiffin 2007, 2015) and "postcolonial ecocriticism" (Cilano and DeLoughrey 2007) aim to integrate postcolonial and environmental concerns, challenging ongoing imperialist structures that perpetuate both social and ecological domination. Ecocritical discussions on (post)colonial literatures have flourished in the past years, while ecolinguistic approaches to World Englishes have endeavoured to illustrate "the interplay between the distinctive features of a regional English and its ecolinguistic environment, including contact with other languages in multilingual speech communities, and the social, cultural and political forces in the context that prompt varietal change and differentiation" (Peters and Burridge 2021: 1).

This paper begins from the above premises and the idea that, as scholars increasingly emphasise the significance of intersections between ecology and (post)colonialism, it becomes imperative for translation studies to engage with and incorporate both of these perspectives. Both postcolonial and eco-translation studies place the interconnectivity between translation and the sense of place at their very heart. However, within the budding fields of eco-translation (Scott 2015; Cronin 2017) and eco-translatogy (Hu 2020), only a few works have directly examined how cultural ecology influences translation practices (and vice versa) within colonial and postcolonial settings or in contexts shaped by migratory movements (Cronin 2017; Dasca and Ceranol 2024).

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This study therefore aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts on the part of the above-mentioned scholars to bridge the disciplinary gap between postcolonial studies and eco-translation by examining a pivotal document in the history of early 20th-century British colonial intervention in the Middle East. *Mesopotamia: Review of the Civil Administration* (1920; hereafter *Mesopotamia*) stands out as a particularly influential example of the "translation project" that Tejaswini Niranjana (1992) associates with colonial administration. Authored by the renowned archaeologist, intelligence agent, and colonial administrator Gertrude Margaret Lowthian Bell (1868–1926) at a time when the nature and scope of a British Mandate over the three former Ottoman *Vilayets* (i.e., "governorates") of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul was fiercely debated, *Mesopotamia* engages, as will be shown in the following sections, in translating colonial "Otherness" into Western codes of representation. Bell's report does more than enact what Niranjana, drawing on Foucauldian terminology, calls "subjection/subjectification practices" (1992: 12), namely the production of new colonial subjectivities through the domestication of an "Otherness" rendered recognisable and communicable. It will be argued that the report also undertakes, through Bell's perspective as a skilled cartographer, ethnographer, and linguist, the task of giving linguistic shape to a varied geographic, cultural, and linguistic ecosystem, while framing British administrative restructuring not only as necessary but also as desirable.

Within months of *Mesopotamia*'s publication, the region was reconfigured as an independent state – the Kingdom of Iraq (1921–1958) – based on a political solution championed by Bell herself: installing the Hashemite royal family, a foreign Sunni dynasty from the Hejaz whose loyalty to Britain had been proven during the Arab Revolt (1916–1918). Issues of nature, landscape, and territory take centre stage in Bell's report and provide the foundation for shaping a new concept of nationhood. Besides, they are central to understanding the reasons of the British involvement in the region during and after the First World War, as the territory was not only rich in resources such as bitumen, oil, and coal, but also strategically vital for ensuring a continuous flow of oil from the fields of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (Di Gregorio 2006; Sluggett 2008).

As already stated, the following sections approach *Mesopotamia* through a postcolonial and eco-translational lens, and they do so in two interrelated ways. Firstly, after a brief historical introduction to Gertrude Bell and her influential report (section 2), section 3 explores how the famous archaeologist translated into English the complex geographical, cultural, and linguistic landscapes of a region that, despite Baghdad's central role on the route to Asia, was reachable only on horseback and generally dismissed as remote and poorly governed (Atia 2012) before the construction of the Baghdad Railway (1903–1940). Most importantly, *Mesopotamia* is approached as an instance of intersemiotic translation (Jakobson 1959; Torop 2000), one that transforms the "mapping" of the mandated territories into textual form. Secondly, this study addresses a recent critical edition and Italian translation of *Mesopotamia* (Bell 2025), intended to acquaint Italian-speaking readers with Gertrude Bell through what is widely regarded as her *magnum opus*. This study tackles the ethical implications of the interlingual translation of a text so profoundly embedded in

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colonial history, and considers what it means today to read this pivotal translational work with an awareness of both the disastrous legacy of early 20th-century British policy in the Middle East, and of how the production of critical editions and translations of colonial reports may cast light on colonial strategies of cultural mediation and territorial representation.

## *2. Gertrude Bell and the Making of* Mesopotamia*: Context and Significance*

> I've just got Mother's letter of Dec 15 saying there's a fandango about my report. The general line taken by the press (press cutting agencies have uninvited sent me some extracts) seems to be that it's most remarkable that a dog should be able to stand up on its hind legs at all – ie [sic] a female write a white paper (Bell 1921)

On 17 January 1921, a few weeks after her report on the civil administration of Mesopotamia had been presented to both Houses of the British Parliament (3 December 1920), Gertrude Bell wrote to her parents to comment on the public reaction it had provoked and, most importantly, to set the record straight. It had not been the Acting Civil Commissioner, Arnold Talbot Wilson, who had "entrusted the preparation of [the report] to Miss Gertrude L. Bell, C.B.E", as was stated on the report's frontispiece (Bell 1920: i). On the contrary, "it was the India Office, and I insisted, very much against [Wilson's] will, on doing it my own way, which though it mayn't be a good way was at least better than his" (Bell 1921).

Bell's epistolary outburst to her parents reveals two key facts about the writing of *Mesopotamia*: first, the pivotal role her report was expected to play (and did play, as a matter of fact) in shaping decisions about the future of a strategically significant region of British interest – alongside the public disbelief that such a responsibility could be entrusted to a woman; and second, that despite its ostensibly neutral, descriptive tone, the report emerged from deeply contested perspectives on both the current state and prospective trajectory of the area under examination. As a "white paper" – a term which, at the beginning of the 20th century had started replacing "bluebook" to indicate a document for public consultation and debate, intended to gauge public opinion on contentious political issues prior to the introduction of formal legislation (Chapman 2016) – *Mesopotamia* cannot be simply regarded as an informative piece of intelligence. Written for a readership interested in the current expansion of colonial interests in the Middle East – not only the two Houses of Parliament, but also a more general public who could buy it "through any Bookseller or directly from H.M. STATIONERY OFFICE" at the reasonable price of 2 shillings (as indicated in the book cover) – *Mesopotamia* dealt with the period from 29th October 1914 (Declaration of war to Turkey, allied to the Central Powers during World War I) to the summer of 1920, when the series of insurgencies known as the "Iraqi Revolt" was forcing the British Government to rethink its politics in the area. Although it did not explicitly advance a concrete proposal, it implicitly set out a strategic vision that later shaped the direction and scope of the British Mandate, an arrangement that differed from Britain's established "protectorate" model in two ways. First, the Mandate was conferred by a supranational authority, the

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League of Nations, following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire; and second, in line with the principle of self-determination articulated in Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points (1918), it was formally tasked with guiding the former Ottoman territories toward political autonomy (Anghie 2002; Matz 2005).

Notwithstanding its contentious background and historical significance, *Mesopotamia* has not attracted as much critical attention as Bell's travelogues, archaeological essays, diaries, or letters. As is typical of colonial reports – official documents produced by colonial administrators to inform the Mother Country about issues such as population, trade, agriculture, finance, law, and social developments – scholars have tended to focus primarily on *Mesopotamia*'s factual and administrative dimensions, often overlooking the aspects that extend beyond its overtly informational content and purposes (Ravizza: forthcoming). Unlike Bell's other writings, *Mesopotamia* has been largely regarded as a technical and administrative document, one that privileges statistics, tables, and factual summaries over narratives or personal reflection. An eco-translational approach to the text, however, may illuminate its semiotic role – how it constructs meaning out of a foreign territory to serve exploitative ends and new institutional configurations – as well as its interactional dimension, namely, the ways in which language, even within the constraints of a standardised, data-driven, and ostensibly impersonal genre, is mobilised to construct and mediate the identities of in-groups (Britain and its local allies) and out-groups (enemies and rivals).

To contextualise *Mesopotamia*, this section surveys how current scholarship has addressed the nature and scope of Gertrude Bell's work. It considers how her personal background enabled her intelligence activities, how her archaeological interests expanded into ethnographic and geographic inquiry, and how scholars have interpreted her writings in light of her conflicted ideological commitments. A devoted Orientalist and Arabist, Bell is remembered, alongside T. E. Lawrence and St. John Philby, as one of the "eccentric" intellectuals and intelligence agents who, between World War I and the early 1920s, gained a reputation as champions of the Arab cause while simultaneously serving British imperial interests (Said 1978: 224). Although much of her diplomacy unfolded behind the scenes, *Mesopotamia*, as a public and widely circulated document, marked a pivotal moment in her strategy and a crucial step toward what she saw as her greatest achievement: persuading British officials, including the then Secretary of State for the Colonies Winston Churchill, to support the nomination of King Faisal bin Husain for the Iraqi throne in 1921 (Sluglett 2017: 26). Bell has inspired biographical and critical studies exploring her diplomatic and archaeological work as well as the complexities of her personality, including issues of gender and ideology. As Collins and Tripp note, perceptions of "Miss Bell" remain divided: for some Iraqis she evokes a nostalgic image of nation-building; for others, she symbolises the imperial attitudes and decisions that contributed to a fractured Middle East (2017: 2).

Born into a wealthy industrial family in north-east England, Bell was a fluent speaker of both Arabic and Farsi, and could boast an unparalleled knowledge of Mesopotamia – a term that, since clearly defined political borders had yet to be established, at the time was used somewhat loosely to describe the region around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Perceived by Ottoman authorities as less

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threatening than her male counterparts, she could travel widely and gathered intelligence in otherwise inaccessible areas both before and during the war. Her privileged social position, wealth and poise granted her access to a remarkable range of circles – from British policymakers and diplomats to local sayyids, sheikhs, tribesmen, and even members of harems (Di Gregorio 2021) – and earned her the title *Khatun*, meaning a respected lady or queen (Wallach 1996; Howell 1999).

During her travels in the Middle East – first within diplomatic circles and later as an independent scholar – Bell developed a strong interest in archaeology. She collaborated with leading figures such as Sir William Mitchell Ramsay, the foremost authority on Asia Minor, and his assistant David G. Hogarth (1862–1927). Hogarth's method of documenting inscriptions, mapping sites, and recording contemporary conditions alongside ancient ruins would later influence Bell's own approach. Her meticulously gathered knowledge of Mesopotamia – initially rooted in archaeology but later proving strategically valuable to British military intelligence at the outbreak of World War I – also reflected a keen interest in the contemporary realities of the region (Di Gregorio 2021). Her collaboration with Hogarth eventually led to her involvement with the Arab Bureau in Cairo, where she joined other prominent orientalists who had transitioned into intelligence work to support the war effort.

In her role within British intelligence, in June 1916, Bell became Oriental Secretary to the Political Department of the Indian Expeditionary Force, serving under Sir Percy Cox, with whom she shared mutual respect. Later, under Acting Civil Commissioner Sir Arnold Wilson, Cox's temporary replacement, tensions arose. Their conflict peaked in 1920 over the British Mandate and the future of Mesopotamia. Wilson had put forward a scheme of dividing the territory into five provinces (Baghdad, Basra, Euphrates, an Arab province of Mosul, and an autonomous Kurdish province in the Mosul area), a proposal which showed awareness of the area's demographic diversity and diversified local need, but also reinforced the prospect of a direct British administrative control (Lukitz 2006: 126). Bell, once supportive of this approach, had shifted to advocate the Sharifian solution: an independent state under the Hashemite dynasty, a foreign royal house with deep historical and religious legitimacy in the Arab world. Her proposal not only envisioned the establishment of a Sunni ruling elite over a Shia majority but also regarded territorial unification as a prerequisite for national independence, thereby dismissing the Kurdish nationalist movement's demand for autonomy.

Bell's ideological shift from endorsing imperial control to advocating Iraqi independence has been interpreted as rooted in a conservative worldview shaped by patriarchal norms and late-Victorian ideals of nationhood and empire (Collins and Tripp 2017; Chalabi 2017; Witwit 2016). Her romanticised vision of the Arab world reflected notions of racial and cultural purity. As Yakoubi (2017: 194) notes, in *Syria: The Desert and the Sown* (1907) Bell described modernity as "encroachment", idealizing the Bedouins as authentic and contrasting them with hybrid urban populations, often disparaged as "Levantine". Her travelogues layered historical and literary imagery onto contemporary landscapes, construing the Orient as a timeless realm as opposed to the instability of

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contemporary British society (Yakoubi 2017: 196). Figures like sheikhs symbolised an immutable order she revered (Collins and Tripp 2017: 12). Consequently, Bell envisioned Arab nationalism through an idealised Golden Age of the Caliphates, seeing the Hashemite dynasty as both a link to historical continuity and a bridge between Arab aspirations and British imperial interests.

The political uncertainty in which *Mesopotamia* was written created the conditions that favoured Bell's proposed political solution. The ongoing Iraqi Revolt (May-October 1920) revealed deep local resistance to British rule, peaking whilst Bell was drafting the report's tenth and final chapter, "The Nationalist Movement". The uprising was quelled months later by the Royal Air Force at great cost, prompting Churchill to adopt a policy of local autonomy, formalised at the 1921 Cairo Conference. In Chapter 10, Bell addresses the insurgency and closes by quoting Baghdad's leading Sunni authority, reflecting elite loyalty claims amid widespread unrest: "The Naqib of Baghdad was not far from expressing public opinion when he observed: 'We have seen what has never been seen before, and we have learnt from it'" (Bell 1920: 147). This representation certainly offered the British Government the compromise it had been seeking: presenting the Mandate as granting local autonomy, as required by the League of Nations, while retaining effective political control through a British-aligned elite.

If it is chiefly the final chapter of Mesopotamia that covertly articulates Bell's political vision, it is nonetheless in the first nine chapters that the report undertakes the construction of what would later become the national and territorial unity of "the 'Iraq". Bell consistently employs this endonym (89 occurrences, as opposed to the 126 occurrences of "Mesopotamia") – already familiar, though seldom used, among British speakers – always preceded by the hamza symbol (') to mark the glottal stop of the Arabic pronunciation. In doing so, she reinforces the Arab identity of a toponym whose obscure etymology may, in fact, be traced back to Sumerian or Middle Persian origins. The name 'Iraq was used locally, though inconsistently, as evidenced by a range of geographical and literary sources spanning several centuries; it generally referred to a region that excluded the northernmost and westernmost areas, and thus the Kurdish-inhabited territories (Bernhardsson 2005: 97–99). Its adoption is therefore highly indicative of Bell's attempt to translate the territory into an Arab-led unity – a process further explored in the following section.

## *3. Mapping Iraq through Translation: Linguistic and Semiotic Patterns of British Colonisation*

In his groundbreaking *Postmodern Geographies*, Edward Soja observes that "[e]very ambitious exercise in critical geographical description, in translating into words the encompassing and politicised spatiality of social life, provokes […] linguistic despair" (1989: 2). While geographies, in Soja's words, are "stubbornly simultaneous", language "dictates a sequential succession, a linear flow of sentential statements" (*ibid.*). This insight informs the following analysis of Bell's *Mesopotamia* from a postcolonial eco-translational perspective – one that also acknowledges that the term geography (from the Greek γεωγραφία, "writing

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of the Earth") inherently designates a performative practice: not merely the representation of space, but its production of meaning through "social translation, transformation, and experience" (*ibid.*: 80). This is particularly relevant to a text like *Mesopotamia* – a work designed to translate the reality of three little-known provinces of the former Ottoman Empire into the imagined unity of a new nation, for the benefit of an audience directly or indirectly engaged in the debate over a new form of colonial governance: the League of Nations mandate.

In this section, two main strategies are examined to elucidate Bell's approach to territorial translation – a cultural operation shaped not only by the sequentiality described by Soja, but also by the perspective of a writer conditioned by the power asymmetries inherent in the colonial situation, as well as by her expectations regarding the future autonomy of the region. The first strategy is her incorporation into English of numerous lexical borrowings, primarily from Arabic, with occasional terms from Turkish, Persian, and even Hindi. The second involves the deliberate representation of the region's physical and natural features, which she employs as interpretive keys for ethnographic understanding. Both of them are strictly related to Bell's cartographic expertise: in her capacity as an intelligence agent and colonial administrator, she had been entrusted with the mapping of the tribes by Colonel W. H. Beach, and she was later directly involved in the drawing of the boundaries of the newly founded Iraq (Wallach 1996: 201).

As regards the first strategy, the use of borrowings is one of the most conspicuous features of Bell's writing. With the only exception of one word ("qiblatan", used adverbially to indicate a location), the several hundreds of foreign words used by Bell are either proper or common nouns. The former include toponyms relating to towns ("Basrah"[1], "'Amarah", "Nasiriyah", "'Qurnah"), regions ("Jazirah", "Kurdistan",...), mountains ("Jabal Maqhul", "Jabal Hamrin",…), lakes ("Hammar", "Van",...), and rivers ("Shatt al-'Arab", "Diyala",...); individual names often accompanied by titles ("Amir Faisal", "Shaikh Ahmad of Barzan"); and names of tribes and local populations ("the Bani Shammar", "the Jubur", "the Beni Lam", "the Khazraj", "the Muntafiq"). Common nouns comprise terms related to territorial administration ("Liwah", "Wilayat", "Amiriyah", "caimacan", "farman"), agriculture ("chibis", "dunum", "fallah", "jerib", "wadi"), religion ("Sunni", "Shia", "alim", "Yazidi"), and aspects of everyday life ("mashuf", "darbar", "bazaar", "henna").

The extensive use of local terms to describe natural and cultural features reflects Bell's linguistic expertise and cartographic competence, but it also functions as a rhetorical strategy to reinforce local autonomy. The text offers no glossary, and definitions of words that must have seemed exotic to its readership are either absent or provided only once. Elements such as the hamza and the use of a romanisation system that in 1920 was still unstandardised further complicate readability, and emphasise the alterity of the region. These foreign words suggest that only indigenous terms can adequately capture local realities. Yet, their integration into English syntax symbolises the fact that the region's

[1] The spellings adopted by Bell, and therefore retained here, often differ from those most commonly used in contemporary English.

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cultural independence could coexist with British guidance, leading local institutions toward stability and eventual self-rule.

The use of territorial description as a key to ethnographic interpretation is particularly evident in the first six chapters. These reflect the chronological and geographical progression of the British military campaign during the Mesopotamian campaign (1914–1918) from the landing of British troops on the Shatt al-'Arab River, through their advance to Basra, across the land between the Tigris and Euphrates toward the urban centre of Baghdad, and finally northwest to the mountainous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, passing through the Jazirah. These chapters focus on the particularities of each geographical and climatic region encountered and their respective populations, while chapters 7 through 9 shift focus to British civil and administrative interventions in all the Vilayets. The latter address the management of agricultural land, the development of civil and judicial institutions across the territory, and various other domains such as education, public health, and public works. The concluding chapter, as mentioned above, is entirely devoted to the Nationalist Movement and to the Iraqi Revolt as it unfolded within and beyond the Baghdad region.

Recurrent linguistic and semiotic patterns related to the mapping of the territory were identified through analysis with the Sketch Engine software (whole corpus: 118,492 words). As a first step, a wordlist was compiled and terms associated with the act of representing space were selected. The concordance lines of the lemmas “draw” (44 occurrences) “boundary” (34 occurrences), “border” (21 occurrences) and “trace” (6 occurrences), as well as the roots, “survey*” (18 occurrences) and “map*” (12 occurrences) were taken into consideration[2]. A qualitative analysis conducted with a discourse analysis approach (Reisigl and Wodak 2009) revealed that these words were primarily used to contrast the British practices of organizing spatial knowledge and establishing control with either the perceived Ottoman incapacity and administrative chaos (extracts 1 and 2), or in some cases, with the changeability of the territory both in relation to the nomadic life of tribes or changing natural features (extracts 3 and 4):

1. The rapid progress made in the mapping of the towns of the 'Iraq has been due largely to the assistance of the Air Force. Air photographs, as adjusted by the Department of Surveys, have made it possible to compile maps of towns which must otherwise have gone unmapped for years. (Bell 1920: 81)[3]

2. The Sa'dun landlords, who looked to us to exact the payment of dues which under the Ottoman regime they had been powerless to recover, were provided with subsistence allowances when necessary, pending a just settlement of the rival claims of themselves and the tribes, which demanded detailed investigation and an agrarian survey. Gradually tribal anarchy was reduced to some sort of order. (*ibid.*: 24)

[2] Other items from the wordlist were considered but ultimately excluded. The lemmas “control” (102 occurrences), “occupation” (99 occurrences), “position” (86 occurrences), and “occupy” (55 occurrences), while semantically related to space and, in many cases, British intervention in space, do not directly encode spatial representation.

[3] All the emphases in the extracts quoted are mine.

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3. A periodical reversion to tents is common, and even the reed villagers are semi-nomadic, shifting frequently from place to place. The puzzled map-maker may find his last addition to geographical knowledge removed, almost before his eyes, from the spot assigned to it in his survey and re-erected on another site. (*ibid.*: 21)

4. When [...] the Tapu sanads could be produced, they were found to be drawn with great inexactitude; no care had been taken in defining the boundaries of the estate in question, and an examination of sanads revealed cases where the boundary on all four sides was described as "the marsh", a line which was subject to seasonal as well as to permanent variations with every change in flood levels. The crowning example of Turkish methods was provided by a sanad referring to a garden near Basrah which was described as being bounded "qiblatan" – a vague term which may be taken to mean approximately S.W. – by the Red Sea. (*ibid*: 17)

Extract 1 illustrates the British matter-of-fact approach to mapping through the use of nominalisations ("rapid progress", "assistance"), passive constructions ("due to", "adjusted by"), and the personification of "air photographs". Extract 2 displays a similar reliance on impersonal forms ("were provided with", "pending a just settlement […] which demanded"), yet it is more explicit in contrasting British efficiency ("[t]he Sa'dun landlords […] looked to us") with Ottoman ineptitude, and in showing how British territorial control translated into a much needed social control of local communities ("[g]radually tribal anarchy was reduced to some sort of order"). Examples 3 and 4, by contrast, deal with territorial instability – whether linked to nomadic practices sustained by local natural resources (for instance, the use of reeds to construct villages) or to the variability of the land itself, as in "the marsh", described as "subject to seasonal as well as to permanent variations with every change in flood levels".

The four examples illustrate both the apparent success of colonial efforts to comprehend and control the territory, and their ultimate failure when confronted with natural forces that resist or disrupt such control. They reveal how the text continually oscillates between two opposing representations: on one side, Mesopotamia appears as a landscape readily shaped by the supposedly "superior" British technology and organisational capacity; on the other, it emerges as a terrain defined by the complexity and instability of its local ecosystems, long intertwined with indigenous ways of life.

### 3.1. Nomads, Settlers, and Climate Change: Characteristics of Iraq's Fertile Plains and Deserts

The report addresses Iraq's geographical regions individually, distinguishing between the deserts, the fertile Mesopotamian floodplain (including the southern marshlands), and the mountainous northeast. The third chapter opens by linking climatic phenomena to the demographic patterns of the fertile Basra and Baghdad plains, home to major urban centres and rich agriculture, in contrast to the surrounding deserts.

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> 5. Outside the immediate vicinity of the towns the whole population of the country is tribal. Larger or smaller units – sometimes combined into loose groups or confederations, sometimes existing at the hazard of chance alliances – till the irrigated land along the rivers and pasture their flocks in the intervening deserts. Some have been established in Mesopotamia from a remote period, others have come in during the last two or three hundred years, but all are originally nomads from the interior wilderness. The unbroken drift of her peoples northwards is one of the most important factors in the history of Arabia. The underlying causes were probably complex, but chief among them must have been a gradual change in the climatic conditions of the peninsula, involving slow desiccation, together with the pressure of an increasing population on a soil growing steadily poorer. To the hunger-bitten nomad, the rich pastures of the Syrian frontier, the inexhaustible fertility of Mesopotamia, offered irresistible attractions, and opportunities for expansion were found in the weakness and political exhaustion of the neighbouring northern States, whether they were Turkish, Byzantine, Persian or yet earlier empires. The long records of Babylonia enable us to trace the process in its earlier historical phases; a study of existing conditions shows that until a recent period it was still going on, and if a forecast may be hazarded, it will not be arrested in the future, though the nature of the immigration may be altered. Instead of devastating hordes, sweeping like locusts over cornfield and pasture, the surplus population of Arabia may find in a Mesopotamia reconstituted by good administration, not only abundant means of livelihood, but far-reaching possibilities of social and intellectual advance; and they will be received with welcome in a land of which the unlimited resources can be put to profit in proportion to the labour available. (*ibid.*: 20)

Semiotically, the passage is structured around two key oppositions. The first contrasts the relentless process of desertification in the interior wilderness of Arabia – whose evidentiality is constructed through archaeological data, an unspecified "study of recent conditions", and the conjecture of a "confident prediction" – with the "unlimited resources" of Mesopotamian soil. The second opposes the chaotic migratory movements of Arabian tribes, "combined into loose groups or confederations, sometimes existing at the hazard of chance alliances", which Bell describes as an "unbroken drift" (a nominal phrase that emphasises both continuity and aimlessness), to the British project of reorganisation. Particularly striking is the simile comparing the nomadic tribes then inhabiting Mesopotamian territory (depicted as "devastating hordes") to the biblical "locust", a comparison that portrays nomadism as a practice of consumption without renewal. A few lines later, Bell observes that "[t]he transition from a nomadic to a settled life is always a slow process, and the very doubtful security offered by Turkish administration did not tend to hasten it". The role of the British administration, by contrast, is presented as that of inaugurating a prospective golden age in which the Arab population might finally prosper. In subsequent sections of the report, agriculture is further emphasised as central to developing the fertile floodplain and southern marshes, focusing on administrative reforms and irrigation to harness the Tigris and Euphrates (chapter 7).

Deserts are represented as "the wide spaces essential to nomadic existence" (*ibid.:* 20), and are depicted as places of passage and travel, where the economy

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is mainly sustained by camel, horse or sheep farming and commerce. Throughout the report, representations of deserts are chiefly functional for the descriptions of the alliances or enmities established by the British. On a few occasions, when allied tribal leaders are involved, the desert is described under a romanticised light, with references to Sinbad the Sailor (*ibid.*: 3) or "pre-Muhammadan poets" (*ibid.*: 20), and is presented as an opportunity for "amass[ing] considerable wealth" with reference to "a population […] of a good type, mainly immigrants from Najd, of pure Arab race", described as "men of independent character and commercial instincts" (*ibid.*: 12). The reference to race purity may easily be read in light of the prejudices and idealizations highlighted in section 2, while the description of the inhabitants of the deserts as proud and dignified, "non-submissive to the authority of the Turkish Government", is occasionally balanced with the observation that among their leaders, who "have such authority as their hereditary position or their personal prowess can command" (*ibid.*: 21), some are open to acknowledging the advantages of an alliance with the British (*ibid.*: 33).

Pride, independence, and the tribes' superior territorial knowledge of harsh natural environments are nevertheless portrayed as a challenge to British authority. As the report notes, "Ottoman officials could exercise little or no control on tribesmen who vanished at will into marsh or desert, whither it was impossible to follow them" (*ibid.*: 21). Similarly, Bell emphasises that the desert can offer refuge to adversaries of the British cause, such as the former outlaw turned tribal chief Haji 'Atiyah (*ibid.*: 37ff.) and the aristocratic leader 'Ajaimi al Sa'dun (*ibid.:* 2ff.). Reflecting on these dynamics, Bell remarks that "[o]ur own experiences, no less than those of the Turks, go to prove that desert alliances are of negative rather than of positive value" (*ibid.:* 26), an assessment she substantiates as follows:

> 6. It is essential to have a definite understanding with Arab rulers, whose wandering tribesmen haunt the edges of the settled lands, nor should this be difficult in times of peace. They depend for the necessities of existence, food, clothing, and the few domestic utensils which they may require, on access to their customary markets, and such access can be made contingent on their good behaviour. (*ibid.*: 26)

The perceived threat of uncontrolled movement – embodied in the notion of "wandering tribes" and strikingly conveyed through the verb "haunt", typically connoting a persistent and unsettling presence that evokes distress or anxiety (OED)[4] – is framed as readily containable through the infantilization of these potential adversaries. Their "good behaviour" is depicted as conditional upon British control over access to basic necessities. In this way, tribal mobility is effectively curtailed by British authority, which regulates entry to vital sites of exchange and commerce, such as markets indispensable to the tribes' survival.

### 3.2. Topographies of Conflict: The Mountains as a Space of Kurdish Resistance

[4] https://www.oed.com/dictionary/haunt_v?tab=meaning_and_use#2131159

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More hostile than the deserts, whose portrayal oscillates between Bell's admiration and apprehension, the mountains, home to Kurds and Yazidis, are depicted as spaces of resistance. They are characterised with adjectives as "rugged" (Bell 1920: 61, 71), "impassable" (*ibid.*: 68), "wild" (*ibid.*: 58) or nouns such as "strongholds" (*ibid.*: 74), emphasizing their inhospitality and hidden danger. "The question of bringing the country north of Rawanduz under effective administration was found to be one of great difficulty, for although the tribes and the population are small, they are well armed and rent by bitter and continuous blood feuds", argues Bell (*ibid.*: 61), directly blaming the mountains because they "preclude the possibility of effective military action against offenders, for to send gendarmes into such a country, even in considerable force, is merely to offer a bait to the tribes, and to run grave risk of a rebuff to which there is no effective reply". Also, as "means of communication are non-existent" (*ibid.*: 69), they prove an even safer refuge for the enemies of the British than the deserts.

Mountain tribes are described as "uncivilised" (*ibid.*: 62), "the flotsam and jetsam of every invasion and immigration for the last 2,000 years and more" (*ibid.*: 51) and even their agricultural methods are characterised as "primitive. The wooden plough is drawn by a yoke of mules, oxen, or donkeys". While the Yazidis are dismissed as a peaceful yet superstitious population (*ibid.*: 50), Kurds, "the most independent as well as the most turbulent element of the [Ottoman] empire" (*ibid.*: 57) appear as rebels whose quest for independence collides with British ambitions. An entire chapter is dedicated to "The Kurdish Question" (Chapter 6), both underscoring the diplomatic initiatives for independence pursued by prominent Kurds (the "Kurdish Club", which would later be renamed "Society for the Rise of Kurdistan") and suggesting that this national aspiration is intertwined with fears of retaliation among a population that had profited substantially from its involvement in the Armenian massacres (*ibid.*: 66). From a British perspective, the Kurdish population is portrayed as reflecting the harshness of the terrain they inhabit – a connotation that, as the following section argues, will carry profound implications for the region's future.

## *4. From Archive to Afterlife: Ethical Challenges in Translating a Colonial Report*

The project of translating Gertrude Bell's *Mesopotamia* into the Italian language (Bell 2025) has been prompted by the desire to present to the Italian public this extraordinary yet highly contested figure in the history of 20th-century British colonial expansion, whose death centenary falls in 2026. This endeavour seeks to move beyond the many romanticised biographical accounts – whether biographies, novels, or film productions – or the travelogues she wrote before becoming involved in intelligence and administrative work. Its aim is to offer readers a glimpse into the diplomatic work through which Bell helped reshape the world.

Nevertheless, translating a work like *Mesopotamia* inevitably raises ethical questions. As Cheyfitz and Harmon observe (2018: 270), "Within the context of empire, of which colonization is a form, translation arrives as violence".

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Positioned as an act of cultural mediation, *Mesopotamia* is no exception to this dynamic as, despite Bell's reputation as a supporter of the Arab cause, it was involved in imposing a form of indirect colonial government onto a nation it contributed to create.

Colonial reports are rarely read today, let alone translated, and introducing a text like *Mesopotamia* to a contemporary audience requires an awareness not only of the historical context in which it was produced, but also of the far-reaching consequences of the decisions taken during that pivotal period. Collins and Tripp identify Bell as chiefly responsible for the Tribal Criminal and Civil Dispute Regulation, which "effectively divided the country into two separate jurisdictions, granting tribal sheikhs judicial and tax-collecting powers across vast swathes of the countryside and greatly enhancing their influence over the emerging state" (2017: 11). This system, based on the notion that tribal territories were ungovernable without a local aristocracy, curtailed democratization and modernization, deepened social inequalities, and undermined prospects for peaceful coexistence among minorities. Eskander (2017) also notes that although Bell's plan garnered some support within the Arab Independence movement, the establishment of an Arab kingdom in Mesopotamia had profoundly detrimental consequences for the Kurdish population, particularly in Southern Kurdistan. In this light, the spatial translation Bell undertook in *Mesopotamia* – as described in the previous section – carried profound judicial, political, and social consequences, ultimately reinforcing national divisions.

Near the end of her life, even Bell became disillusioned with the Iraq she helped create. Her political career ended when Faisal I reassigned her as "Director of Antiquities" (*promoveatur ut amoveatur*), enabling her to establish the National Library and Archaeological Museum, and draft excavation laws but *de facto* limiting her influence to cultural rather than political matters. Ethnic and social tensions persisted. Bell died shortly before her 58th birthday from a barbiturate overdose under unclear circumstances. The monarchy she shaped lasted only a few decades before its overthrow in the 1958 military coup led by the anti-British Nationalist Officers' movement.

Translating *Mesopotamia* into Italian first required reflecting on the role such a text might play for contemporary readers – and why anyone should engage with a work focused on a moment when the history of Iraq and British intervention in the Middle East was still "in the making". This question yielded a twofold answer. First, readers may value *Mesopotamia* for its informational richness: the report explores the minutiae of early twentieth-century life in Mesopotamia during and after the First World War, detailing British reorganization efforts, mapping territorial and natural features, and examining the complexities of local ethnicities, tribes, and religious affiliations. It also records micro-histories involving both local actors and British military figures. Second, *Mesopotamia* is compelling for its interactional dimension – the way it constructs and projects identities of in-groups (Britain and its representatives or allies) and out-groups (colonised subjects, enemies, rivals) onto the text, and consequently onto the reality it describes, framing colonial interventions. As the previous section has shown, *Mesopotamia* can be read as a semiotic practice

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embedded in a historical context and specific fields of social action. In other words, the reader's attention should focus not only on what the text says, but also on how it says it.

As concerns the first of these features, i.e., the informational aspect of *Mesopotamia*, some translational choices were made to enhance the content and to facilitate a contemporary reader's consultation of the work. The translation thus involved careful restructuring: the text was divided into thematic sections with subheadings summarising their content, allowing readers to navigate the work more easily and to consult it selectively – e.g., read only sections regarding specific battles, areas, tribes, or religious issues. The subheadings were also reported at the beginning of each chapter in order to serve as a summary.

This restructuring also required reflecting on the multilingual dimension of Bell's translation, which, as the previous section argued, formed an important part of her rhetorical strategy. Bell sought to render the Mesopotamian world by incorporating its linguistic alterity, notably through graphic symbols reproducing Arabic phonemes, such as the hamza ['], representing the voiceless glottal stop (a sound present in some English variants but rarely marked in writing), or by using "h" to indicate the glottal fricative at the end of Arabic words (e.g., "Basrah" for the city of Basra, now commonly written as "Basra" in English). In the Italian translation, these spellings were adapted to those more familiar to an Italian audience (e.g., "Basrah" was rendered as "Bassora", "Nasiriyah" as "Nassiria", etc.), which has become accustomed to Iraqi place names through media coverage of the two wars that devastated the country at the turn of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, because certain technical terms are either undefined or explained only once (e.g., "Tapu", land registry; "sanad", edict or ordinance), a glossary has been provided at the end of the translation to facilitate comprehension and to allow a selective consultation of the work.

Emphasising the second aspect, i.e., the "interpersonal" dimension, has proven far more challenging. The term "interpersonal", taken from Systemic Functional Linguistics, concerns how language constructs and sustains social relationships, while enacting roles within a very specific context deeply marked by colonial asymmetries. To this end, a rich apparatus of footnotes was employed to contextualise and explain Bell's linguistic choices and their rendering into Italian, creating a space for readers to grasp the implications of these choices within the worldview Bell represented. Some of these choices may now appear not only ideologically problematic but also confusing to contemporary readers. One footnote, for instance, addresses Bell's frequent use of singular forms to denote what she perceived as the essential characteristics of entire populations. Expressions such as "the Arab", "the Kurd", and "the Turk" recur in the original text, though the Italian translation has converted them into plurals for the sake of clarity.

Two introductions precede the translation, addressing both the informational/ideational and the relational/interpersonal dimensions of *Mesopotamia*, as well as the rationale behind rendering it into Italian. The first, written by Pinella di Gregorio, a historian specializing in British policy in the Middle East, focuses on the "factual" content of the report and examines Gertrude Bell's diplomatic role. The second, authored by the translator (and

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writer of this essay), a scholar with a background in postcolonial studies and historical linguistics, centres on the "interpersonal" dimension. This introduction contextualises Bell's rhetorical and semiotic strategies, and aims to encourage readers to engage critically with her work, questioning the very processes of knowledge production that underpinned colonial intervention, including the "said", the "unsaid", or the "understated". For instance, within this category falls Bell's treatment of Iraq's oil resources and their strategic significance for Britain – an issue she mentions only briefly at the outset of the report. The remainder of the text largely emphasises British accomplishments in Iraqi territory rather than exploring what the territory did offer Britain.

What is most compelling about this cultural undertaking, i.e., the first Italian translation of a colonial report, is its recovery of a neglected text from the so-called "colonial archive", the vast corpus of historical documentation on British imperial governance, in order to reopen it to new questions and interrogate it through fresh perspectives and methodologies. The eco-translational approach adopted in this essay has made it possible to explore the interplay between colonial cultural mediation and representations of environment, natural resources, and even climate, revealing how colonial translation practices shaped the linguistic configuration of cultural ecologies. The outcome of this inquiry remains open to further questioning, as it represents only a first step toward understanding the dynamic relationship between language, culture, and structures of power.

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