

Beyond Sea and Desert

Journeying Between London and Baghdad in the Interwar Years

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In July 1929, the Iraqi Minister of Finance, Yusuf Rizq Allah Ghanima, left Baghdad with his wife and children for a three-month stay abroad.¹ The family crossed the Syrian Desert by car and spent a few days visiting Damascus and Beirut together before parting ways. Yusuf Ghanima continued his journey to Europe alone, where he spent time in Rome, Paris, and London before returning to Lebanon towards the end of September to be reunited with his family. Although the primary motivation for his journey was to find a doctor in Europe who could treat his heart condition, he also traveled for other purposes and under many guises: as a wealthy tourist, a well-known Christian figure, and an Iraqi minister. In the same year, the British travel writer Freya Stark left London for a summer sojourn in Italy before embarking on a steamer to Haifa and Beirut, and then continuing on a journey of several months eastwards. This was her second trip across the Mediterranean, but the first time she crossed the Syrian Desert and visited Iraq, where she spent about five months before heading to Iran. For two years, she had been nurturing the desire to visit Baghdad by reading the accounts of European travelers who had journeyed to “Arabia” in past centuries, researching Iraq’s archaeological sites, and immersing herself in the imagination of the *Arabian Nights*.²

These two journeys across the Mediterranean and the Syrian Desert shed light on the transregional connections that developed between Europe and Mesopotamia – or the nascent state of Iraq – during the interwar period. In the late 1920s, it was possible to travel from Baghdad to London or vice versa in nine days using motorized transport across the Syrian Desert, whereas a decade earlier the journey took

1 I am very grateful for the comments and suggestions from the editors and all the participants to the workshop *At the Crossroads – The Middle Eastern and the North Atlantic World During the Interwar Years*, which helped me to improve and revise the previous versions of this chapter.

2 See the letters she wrote during her first visit to Lebanon and Syria in 1927–1928. Freya Stark: *Letters from Syria* (London: Murray, 1942).

between 20 and 25 days by sea via the Suez Canal.³ Their journeys reflect two ways of navigating the vast, transregional web of interlocking transport networks that combined cars, ships, and trains. But there is more to these two personal experiences.

In following the travels of Freya Stark and Yusuf Ghanima, this chapter takes its cue from a burgeoning scholarship that focuses on the experience of “transit” of those who traveled around the world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As Martin Dusinberre and Roland Wenzlhuemer put it, this perspective aims to “remap the occasionally bland language of ‘connections’ – of analyses that locate the place of a journey’s beginning and end but assign it a character of placelessness or ‘nowhere’ during the in-between – by focusing more precisely on *transit*.⁴ By investigating connections and movements between Europe and Iraq through the experiences of Freya Stark and Yusuf Ghanima, this chapter falls within the framework of global microhistory, which proposes to rethink global processes and the questions we ask about them by focusing on specific spaces, objects, or individuals and by paying attention to details in the sources.⁵ Here, the microhistorical approach, as historian John-Paul A. Ghobrial points out, may enable us “to challenge the triumphalism of grand narratives of mobility”.⁶ By examining the travel accounts of these two individuals, this chapter aims to uncover the practicalities and difficulties associated with traveling, the observations, perceptions, and feelings of Freya Stark and Yusuf Ghanima, and their encounters with the people and spaces they came across. Combined with the examination of more institutional sources, the study of travel accounts can help us move beyond the sometimes overly simplistic narrative of accelerated mobility and increased connectivity put forward in global history and mobility studies.⁷

3 Christina P. Grant: *The Syrian Desert: Caravans Travel and Exploration* (London: A. & C. Black, 1937), 276.

4 Martin Dusinberre/Roland Wenzlhuemer: “Editorial – being in transit: Ships and global incompatibilities”, in: *Journal of Global History* 11:2 (2016), 155–162, here 158. See also David Lambert/Peter Merriman (eds.): *Empire and Mobility in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 6.

5 Romain Bertrand/Guillaume Calafat: “La microhistoire globale: affaire(s) à suivre”, in: *Annales HSS* 73:1 (2018), 3–18; Sebastian Conrad: *What Is Global History?* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 129–132; John-Paul A. Ghobrial: “Introduction: Seeing the World like a Microhistorian”, in: *Past & Present* 242:14 (2019), 1–22.

6 John-Paul A. Ghobrial: “Moving Stories and What They Tell Us: Early Modern Mobility Between Microhistory and Global History”, in: *Past & Present* 242:14 (2019), 243–280, here 249.

7 On the importance of reflecting on immobility, differential access to mobility, impediments to movement, etc., see Nina Glick Schiller/Noel B. Salazar: “Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe”, in: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39:2 (2013), 183–200. It is worth noting that in the early 2000s, proponents of the ‘mobility turn’ were well aware of the need to think about the factors that produce mobility for some and immobility for others: Kevin Hannam/

While traveling around and through the Mediterranean and the Syrian Desert, Yusuf Ghanima and Freya Stark gave accounts of their journeys in letters and travelogues. Ghanima wrote two diaries which were later compiled by his son into a travelogue, *Rihla ilā Urubbā 1929* (*A Journey to Europe 1929*). These diaries recorded his daily activities, as well as his observations and feelings, from the day he left Baghdad until his return.⁸ For her part, Freya Stark published a travelogue of her journey to Iraq in 1937, *Baghdad Sketches*.⁹ But she also wrote numerous letters to friends and relatives during her trip, which formed the basis of the second book of her four-volume autobiography, *Beyond Euphrates: Autobiography 1928–1933*. Published in 1951, this volume combines Stark's letters with introductory notes reflecting the author's later thoughts on her journey.¹⁰

Like all travel narratives, these accounts are composites, made up of notes and scripts written in different places and times, possibly rewritten as well.¹¹ Nevertheless, although the editing process cannot be ignored, Freya Stark's autobiography and Yusuf Ghanima's travelogue consist mainly of notes and letters written *during* the two authors' journeys. Thus, these accounts differ from many travelogues published with a time lag, which inevitably raise the question of their authors' relationship with their memories and travel notes.¹² In what follows, travel writing is first and foremost understood as a genre that reflects how travelers "make sense of themselves and the worlds through which they move", as Roxanne L. Euben puts it. Travel narratives can reveal how traveling functions as a reflexive and transformative experience, in which travelers become aware of and reshape their conceptions of "home and away, self and other, familiar and foreign".¹³ For both Freya Stark and Yusuf Ghanima, the spatial and temporal dimensions of the journey left their mark. Traveling transformed their perceptions of space, either by making them more aware of geographical distance or by altering their spatial imaginations concerning the

Mimi Scheller/John Urry: "Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings", in: *Mobilities* 1:1 (2006), 1–22.

8 Yusuf Ghanima: *Rihla ilā Urubbā 1929: mukhtārāt min yawmiyyāt wa rasā'il* (Baghdad: Maṭba'at al-Sa'dūn, 1986). The diaries were compiled by Harith Y. Ghanima.

9 Freya Stark: *Baghdad Sketches* (London: Murray, 1937).

10 Freya Stark: *Beyond Euphrates: Autobiography 1928–1933* (London: Murray, 1951). Other letters can be found in: Freya Stark: *Letters. Vol. 1. The Furnace and the Cup, 1914–1930*, edited by Lucy Moorehead (Salisbury: Compton Russel, 1974).

11 James Duncan/Derek Gregory (eds.): *Writs of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (London/New York: Routledge, 1999), 3–4.

12 On travelogues being (re)written and published later on, see Michael Ursinus: "Ottoman Travels and Travel Accounts from an Earlier Age of Globalization", in: *Die Welt des Islams* 40:2 (2000), 133–138, here 135.

13 Roxanne L. Euben: *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 9–10.

world.¹⁴ As will become apparent, moreover, their travel experience was influenced by a combination of materialities, socialities, and affects, including but not limited to the expanding transport infrastructure that greatly reduced travel time between London and Baghdad.¹⁵ Furthermore, travel writing has been widely studied in terms of the cross-cultural encounters that travel entails. In this regard, a vast literature has criticized and qualified Edward Said's view that the narratives of travelers from the North Atlantic world to the 'Orient' formed a coherent discourse that shaped and othered the spaces and populations they encountered. Instead, the study of travelogues reveals both heterogeneous attitudes and perspectives as well as the transformative nature of these encounters for both travelers and local people.¹⁶ Drawing again on Roxanne L. Euben, this chapter shows that Freya Stark's and Yusuf Ghanima's narratives highlight multiple encounters producing various feelings of familiarity and otherness in the course of their journeys, thus demonstrating the diversity and multiplicity of the North Atlantic and Middle Eastern worlds.¹⁷ Finally, while documenting the workings of the transport networks that connected Europe with Iraq and vice versa, these travel accounts show the coexistence of different forms of mobility and the highly variable travel conditions of those who moved along these routes, whether they were upper-class travelers, less fortunate migrants, or poor pilgrims heading for Mecca. They also reveal how these mobilities were classified by states according to social, racial, and gender categories that underpinned different mobility regimes, which historians and other scholars have highlighted as a process that accompanied globalization.¹⁸

¹⁴ On connections between travel, cultural production, and spatial imaginaries, see Johannes Riquet/Elizabeth Kollmann (eds.): *Spatial Modernities: Geography, Narrative, Imaginaries* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁵ In his article on 'passengering', Paul Ashmore calls for the study of the "social, material and affective assemblages" that contribute to the experience of travelling/passengering: Paul Ashmore: "Slowing Down Mobilities: Passengering on an Inter-war Ocean Liner", in: *Mobilities* 8:4 (2013), 595–611.

¹⁶ Ali Behdad: *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1994), 9–13; Kate Hill: "Introduction: Narratives of Travel, Narratives that Travel", in: Kate Hill (ed.): *Britain and the Narration of Travel in the Nineteenth Century: Texts, Images, Objects* (London/New York: Routledge, 2016), 1–10; Geoffrey P. Nash: *From Empire to Orient: Travellers to the Middle East, 1830–1926* (London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005); Mary Louise Pratt: *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁷ Roxanne L. Euben: *Journeys to the Other Shore*, 14.

¹⁸ Valeska Huber: *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Liat Kozma: *Global Women, Colonial Ports: Prostitution in the Interwar Middle East* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017); Jordi Tejel/Ramazan Hakkı Öztan (eds.): *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918–1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

I Freya Stark

Freya Stark (1893–1993) grew up between Britain and Italy, where her family owned a small house. During her youth and early adulthood, she acquired a broad literary culture both by herself and by studying at university. She also traveled extensively in Europe, before feeling the urge to cross the Mediterranean. In 1927, she left Europe after reading the accounts of many travelers who had visited the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire before her. She was driven by the desire to become an explorer and writer herself, and attracted by recent archaeological discoveries in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Freya Stark traveled with very little money and stood out from her fellow citizens in how she interacted with the locals and because she spoke some Arabic, to the extent that she came to be considered a “subversive” traveler by the British.¹⁹ Freya Stark was still unknown to the public during her first trips to Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, which inspired her to write accounts of her travels. In 1928, she published one of her first newspaper articles about her stay in the Lebanese mountain resort of Brummana. Her situation was not much different when she traveled for the first time to Iraq in 1929, as James Canton pointed out: “in Baghdad, she was very much an unknown figure, though one gaining a reputation as a daring and audacious woman.”²⁰ This would change during the 1930s, as she gained a reputation and some notoriety, but also as her relationship with the British community and administration overseas gradually changed. By the time she published *Baghdad Sketches* in 1937, she had established herself as a famous traveler and writer in British society and her initial reputation as a “subversive” traveler had partly fallen away.²¹

Infrastructure and Logistics

On 26 September 1929, Freya Stark embarked on a Lloyd Triestino ship, the *Carnaro*, heading from Trieste to Jaffa and Beirut. At the time, Lloyd Triestino operated a number of shipping lines between Italy and the Eastern Mediterranean and advertised its service as the “quickest routes [...] to the Far East”, from Greece to India.²² Trieste was also an important transit port on the migration route of European Jews, and the ships of Lloyd Triestino carried more than a hundred thousand migrants

19 Jane Fletcher Geniesse: *Passionate Nomad: The Life of Freya Stark* (London/New York: Modern Library, 2001); Malise Ruthven: *Freya Stark in the Levant* (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1994), 7–10; Malise Ruthven: “A Subversive Imperialist: Reappraising Freya Stark”, in: *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 26 (2006), 147–167.

20 James Canton: *From Cairo to Baghdad: British Travellers in Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 119.

21 *bid.*, 120, 139; Malise Ruthven: “A Subversive Imperialist”, 147–167.

22 Maura Elise Hametz: “Envisioning the Italian Mediterranean Fascist Policy in Steamship Publicity, 1922–1942”, in: *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 16:1/2 (2006), 175–186, here 182.

from Trieste to Palestine during the interwar period.²³ On board the *Carnaro*, Freya Stark came “for the first time fully face to face with the Zionists of Palestine”, as she later wrote in her autobiography.²⁴ The emigration of Jews to Palestine was also the subject of discussions with her cabin mate. In a letter written on the ship, she explained that she shared her cabin with three “missionary women from Palestine” with whom they talked about the recent “massacre” of Jews in Palestine, a hint at the murder of dozens of Jews in Hebron in August 1929.²⁵

Lloyd Triestino’s ships provided a regular service between Italy and Palestine, but also operated up to Beirut, thus linking southern Europe to the French mandated territories of Lebanon and Syria.²⁶ After a journey of about a week at sea, Freya Stark arrived in Lebanon, where she had planned to spend a few weeks in a mountain resort before leaving for Iraq. At the port of Beirut, she was able to clear customs without paying duty on her luggage, as some convenience was granted to travelers who were only passing through or spending a short time in Lebanon and Syria. As Freya Stark recounted, these institutional arrangements were well known to those not entitled to them, as some of the ship’s passengers sought to circumvent customs legislation by taking advantage of her situation.

Then the young Levantine who was also on the boat thought he might profit by my going to Baghdad and avoid paying duty on his luggage, mine being ‘in transit’. The porter murmured some Arabic to this effect, and I would not really have minded annexing three more suitcases: but when a man’s bicycle was added and I was asked if it belonged to me I said ‘No’, and also repudiated the young Levantine who apparently had described himself as travelling with me.²⁷

Apart from these provisions to promote the movement of foreign travelers, Freya Stark also benefited from a transport infrastructure that now enabled travelers to move between the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia in just two or three days.

In the late 1920s, various companies offered regular car and bus services between Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad at widely varying prices and standards. The transport sector had grown and diversified considerably since the first attempts to drive through the Syrian Desert in the aftermath of the First World War. In October 1923,

²³ Ibid., 115.

²⁴ Freya Stark, *Beyond Euphrates*, 64.

²⁵ Ibid., 70; Henri Laurens : *La question de Palestine, Tome 2 : Une mission sacrée de civilisation, 1922–1947* (Paris : Fayard, 2002), 538–548.

²⁶ In the post-war context, the San Remo Conference of April 1920 ratified the designation of France by the League of Nations as Mandatory Power in Syria and Lebanon, thus entrusting it with the task of assisting the populations of these territories until they were deemed fit for independence.

²⁷ Freya Stark, *Beyond Euphrates*: Letter to Venetia Buddicom ('Darling B'), Brummana, 5 October 1929.

two New Zealand brothers Norman and Gerry Nairn, who had previously served in the British army in Palestine, set up a regular transport service for mail and passengers between Haifa, Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad. In their wake, the Lebanese Francis and Alfred Kettaneh established the Eastern Transport Company in 1924, whose cars departed from Beirut and went as far as Tehran.²⁸ These first two transport companies mainly targeted a wealthy clientele by offering a service to European standards.²⁹ After their merger in 1926, the Nairn Eastern Transport Company continued to develop a luxury service.³⁰ Meanwhile, several Lebanese, Syrian, and Iraqi entrepreneurs tried their hand at transdesert transport with varying degrees of success. After the first of these companies went bankrupt, two other Syrian companies emerged in 1928 and enjoyed some success in transdesert transport: Debesh & Akkash and Adib Shaaban.³¹

Freya Stark chose to travel with one of them. As soon as she stepped ashore at the port of Beirut, the agent of a “native transport company” approached her to propose a good price for the trip to Baghdad: only nine pounds, including the transport of her luggage. Stark was well aware that the majority of European travelers journeyed with the renowned Nairn Transport Company, but chose instead to accept the offer of the Syrian company. “The English Company, the Nairn, charge £19 without luggage, and I can’t think the difference can be worth the £12”, she wrote to her friend Venetia Buddicom, suggesting that the Nairn Transport Company also charged an additional £2 for luggage.³² After a few weeks in the Lebanese resort of Brummana, Freya Stark left Damascus on the morning of 25 October for the transdesert journey. Although the agent of the transport company in Beirut had assured her that her traveling companions would be British, presumably in an attempt to win her over, they proved to be of different nationalities.

The two ladies have turned out to be Greeks from Constantinople settled in Aleppo and now going to visit a brother who is a pastry-cook in Baghdad, where I have

28 Christina P. Grant, *The Syrian Desert*, 270–289.

29 Circular letters by the Nairn Transport Company and the Eastern Transport Company attached to the letter from the US Consulate, Baghdad to the Department of State, 14 April 1925, The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) at College Park, Record Group 59, roll 16, 890d (Syria).

30 “New Car for the Desert Route, *Baghdad Times*, 18 February 1926”, Middle East Centre Archive, Oxford (MECA), GB165-0215, Nairn Transport Company Collection; Thomas Cook’s agency, Haifa to Thomas Cook & Son, London, 13 March 1935, Thomas Cook Archives (TCA), Black Box 32 ‘Nairn Transport Company’.

31 ‘Trans-desert motor transport concerns established in Baghdad: December 1929’, appendix to extract from Economic report N°149, The National Archives (TNA), CO 732/39/11.

32 Freya Stark, *Beyond Euphrates*: Freya Stark to Venetia Buddicom, Brummana, 5 October 1929.

promised to call on them. The only other traveller is a young Levantine in a bérét, very obliging and polite, but not at all like a colonel in any army.³³

The small group left Damascus at 8.20 a.m. "We had a great time strapping the luggage, and I was just able to insist on not having half of mine left behind", she wrote to her father.³⁴ They traveled for two hours until they reached the French border post of Abu Shamat. The various cars traveled in convoy for security reasons, as Stark remarked: "It is not so much fear of raids now as that a car can get stuck or lost: one driver alone two months ago went round and round in the immense spaces till his petrol was finished, and he was found dead." The group continued without stopping until nightfall when they halted for a few hours at a place called Rutbah, where a fort and hotel offered travelers a safe haven in the desert, halfway between Damascus and Baghdad. "It is very like the sort of place the Jinn used to produce when the lamp was rubbed, I am sure", she wrote in terms that evoked the *Arabian Nights* imaginary that accompanied her, but also her pleasure at finding a safe place after a harrowing journey through the desert. At 1 a.m. the group set off again for a twelve-hour journey, first to Ramadi and then to Baghdad.³⁵

Mesopotamia and the (Middle) East

It is very remarkable – here I am in Baghdad. I sometimes wonder how it comes about. [...] There are no beautiful bazaars like Damascus, and the mosques with their gaudy domes do not seem beautiful from what I have seen (but I haven't yet examined). But the *people* are there; and I shall be very happy I do believe. That is after all the real interest: the people here are of all fascinating sorts – the beautiful ones being Kurds.³⁶

Freya Stark could not believe that she was in Baghdad, in this city she perceived as so far away. For a European traveler like her, visiting Baghdad was a novel experience and still an unusual practice at the time. In the 19th century, indeed, Mesopotamia still represented "a remote and unwelcoming locale" for travelers from the North

33 Freya Stark, *Baghdad Sketches*, 5. In a letter to her friend Viva Jeyes, she described this group of women in a different way: 'a Turkish family from Aleppo whose male members keep a rather low-down eating house here'. She may have understood afterwards that these women were of Greek origin, but in any case she seems to have had difficulty in identifying them. Freya Stark: *Letters*, Vol. 1: Letter to Viva Jeyes, 26 October 1929.

34 Freya Stark, *Beyond Euphrates*: Letter to Robert Stark ('Pips'), Freya's father, Zia Hotel, Baghdad, 26 October 1929.

35 Freya Stark, *Letters*. Vol. 1: Letter to Viva Jeyes, Zia Hotel, Baghdad, 26 October 1929; Freya Stark, *Beyond Euphrates*: Letter to Robert Stark, Zia Hotel, Baghdad, 26 October 1929.

36 Freya Stark, *Letters*. Vol. 1: Letter to Venetia Buddicom, Zia Hotel, Baghdad, October 1929 (emphasis in original).

Atlantic world.³⁷ European tourists crossing the Mediterranean used to visit Greece, Egypt, and Eastern Mediterranean cities such as Jerusalem, Beirut, and Istanbul.³⁸ In contrast, Iraq was only just beginning to open up to European and American tourists in the early 1920s. To be sure, people and goods moved through the Syrian Desert before the advent of the automobile. Throughout the Ottoman period, camel caravans connected the cities of the Eastern Mediterranean with those of Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf and continued to do so until the beginning of the 20th century and even during the interwar years. However, the desert journey took between three weeks and a month for the caravans.³⁹ The development of a car-based transport system in the post-war years not only facilitated mobility across the Syrian Desert, but also provided new travel opportunities between Europe and Mesopotamia. By way of the desert route, Baghdad was now within nine days of London, a fact not lost on the well-known British travel agency Thomas Cook & Son, which was quick to promote Iraq as a tourist destination by publishing brochures and travel guides and making arrangements with the Nairn Transport Company.⁴⁰ As a major player in the “business of tourism”, the British agency played an influential role in making travel to Iraq more convenient and desirable in the 1920s, just as it had done in Egypt a few decades earlier.⁴¹

Like her British counterparts visiting Iraq, Freya Stark was imbued with orientalist imaginings and a desire to discover the archaeological remains of ancient cities such as Babylon and Ur. At the same time, she was also deeply interested in the people, as illustrated in the above quote. This interest found expression in frequent comparisons between the language, culture, and appearance of the people she observed in Iraq and Syria. On arrival at the border post of Ramadi, for instance, she noted that the Arabs were “very much darker here than the Syrian and not so fine a type from what I could see.”⁴² Other such remarks punctuated her letters, always con-

37 Frederick N. Bohrer: “Inventing Assyria: Exoticism and Reception in Nineteenth-Century England and France”, in: *The Art Bulletin* 80:2 (1998), 336–356, here 337.

38 Waleed Hazbun: “The East as an Exhibit: Thomas Cook & Son and the origins of the International Tourism Industry in Egypt”, in: Philip Scranton/Janet F. Davidson (eds.): *The Business of Tourism: Place, Faith, and History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 3–33.

39 Philippe Pétriat: “Caravan Trade in the Late Ottoman Empire: The ‘Aqil Network and the Institutionalization of Overland Trade”, in: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 63:1/2 (2019), 38–72; Faruk Tabak: “Local Merchants in Peripheral Areas of the Empire: The Fertile Crescent during the Long Nineteenth Century”, in: *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 11:2 (1988), 179–214.

40 “A Land Made Fit for Tourists: The Remarkable Development of Mesopotamia”, in: *The Traveller’s Gazette* 73:12 (December 1923), 11; “To Baghdad in Nine Days”, in: *The Traveller’s Gazette* 74:10 (March 1924), 10; as well as the brochure *Tours to Mesopotamia (Iraq)*, season 1927–1928, 18, TCA.

41 Waleed Hazbun, “The East as an Exhibit”, 3–33.

42 Freya Stark, *Beyond Euphrates*: Letter to Robert Stark, Zia Hotel, Baghdad, 26 October 1929.

cerned with the physical traits of Iraqis, as compared with that of Syrians.⁴³ In some respects, these comparisons reflected Freya Stark's changing understanding of the world. The new travel opportunities across the Syrian Desert and the intensive advertising of Iraq by transport and tourism companies were having a significant impact on the spatial imaginations of Europeans, putting Mesopotamia on the map of an increasing number of travelers, merchants, and diplomats in the North Atlantic world.

On her first trip to Lebanon and Syria in 1928, Freya Stark spent time in Brummana and Damascus, two places she saw as belonging to distinct spaces, separated by the Anti-Lebanon mountain range. After one of her journeys from Damascus to Beirut through these mountains, she wrote to her mother Flora Stark: "We have left the East behind us. This is not Europe: but it is Mediterranean. Very lovely."⁴⁴ A year later, she made the same comment in a letter addressed, once again, to Flora Stark after her arrival in Damascus: "It seemed incredible to be here again and find it all better than before. I feel I am in the real East again."⁴⁵ She had a similar feeling in 1929 when she crossed the Syrian Desert. The further she got from the Mediterranean, the deeper Freya Stark felt she was entering another world. As she explained in her autobiography, the journey from Damascus to Baghdad opened up new horizons for her, in a very literal sense.

Of all the sights and sounds and feelings which my first winter in Baghdad brought me, three principal influences remained. The first was the most obvious, the immediate *enlargement of my world* to include an East independent of the Mediterranean. A foretaste of this had been given by Damascus the year before, for the great valley behind the Lebanon, the Bek'a, is I think the boundary between the Levant and Asia. Where the tiled roofs end and the flat roofs become general, and the Christian churches have no bells, is the beginning; and it is roughly separated from the Mediterranean world by a curtain of wastelands, of which the Syrian-Iraqi desert is the easiest to cross.⁴⁶

By reducing travel times between Europe and Iraq, the new transport opportunities created a sense of shrinking space, but they also led to an "expansion of transport space" by including new regions into the existing transport system and, consequently, in the mental map of travelers like Freya Stark.⁴⁷ They also gave rise among

43 Freya Stark, *Beyond Euphrates*: [Notebook] 1.11.29. "The Iraqi has not the haughty beauty of the Syrian [...]. Nose wide at nostril and slightly tilted: eyebrows inclined to meet: three-cornered face: lovely dark brown hair with wave in it seems typical."

44 Freya Stark, *Letters. Vol. 1*: Letter to Flora Stark, Brummana, 17 April 1928.

45 Ibid.: Letter to Flora Stark, Damascus, 19 October 1929.

46 Freya Stark, *Beyond Euphrates*, 83. Emphasis is mine.

47 This dialectical effect has been examined by Wolfgang Schivelbusch with regard to rail transport in Europe: Wolfgang Schivelbusch: *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and*

travelers to new spatial imaginaries that organised the world. As Duncan Bell put it, transport and communications technologies produced “an imaginative rescaling of planetary space.”⁴⁸ In this process of reshaping her mental map, Freya Stark conceived of the Mediterranean Sea, the Anti-Lebanon mountain range, and the Syrian Desert as natural boundaries shaping regions populated by different societies.⁴⁹

The growing European awareness of and interest in Iraq was not a completely new phenomenon, however. Historical scholarship has shown that Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf acquired a central importance for the British Empire in India over the course of the 19th century, as this region was progressively regarded as first a buffer zone and then a corridor facilitating mobility and communication between India and Europe.⁵⁰ Advances in transport and communications also made the Persian Gulf region more accessible to colonial administrators, soldiers, and travelers of all kinds in the 19th century. In 1902, the United States naval officer Alfred Mahan recommended that the British secure control of “the Middle East”, a term he coined to refer to the region centered on the Persian Gulf and which he deemed central to London’s maritime connections with India. The term was not immediately adopted and stood alongside other more commonly used terms such as the “Near East” for two decades before it took hold.⁵¹ In the interwar period, British and French colonial expansion into the former Ottoman provinces, the creation of the Middle Eastern mandates and the expansion of transport links across the Mediterranean and the Syrian Desert made Europeans even more conscious of the areas north of the Persian Gulf. As Vincent Capdepuy has argued, the development of a transport system across the Syrian Desert greatly contributed to shaping “the centrality of the Syrian-Iraqi space” for foreign powers. As the lands surrounding the Syrian Desert became of crucial importance to both the European imperial powers and the USA,

Space in the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 121–122. See also John Urry: *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 100–101.

48 Duncan Bell: *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 174.

49 On the modern view that societies are closely associated with bounded spaces, see Doreen Massey: *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), 62–75.

50 Guillemette Crouzet: *Genèses du Moyen-Orient : Le Golfe Persique à l'âge des impérialismes (vers 1800-vers 1914)* (Ceyzérieu : Champ Vallon, 2015), chapter 6.

51 Roger Adelson: “British and U.S. Use and Misuse of the Term ‘Middle East’”, in: Bonine, Michael E./Amanat, Abbas/Gasper, Michael E. (eds.): *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 36–55; Vincent Capdepuy: “Proche ou Moyen-Orient? Géohistoire de la notion de Middle East”, in: *L’Espace Géographique* 37:3 (2008), 225–238, here 232–233.

the term “Middle East” came into wider use, encompassing and replacing the older term “Near East”.⁵²

Freya Stark’s travel accounts shed light on how these geopolitical and infrastructural developments could operate within an individual’s spatial representations. By stating that her trip to Iraq had *enlarged* her world she provided a very telling illustration of how this region later known as the “Middle East” emerged in the minds of travelers from the North Atlantic world in the interwar period. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Freya Stark never talked of the “Middle East” in her letters sent from Baghdad. Yet she started to make extensive use of the term in a later book published in 1945, where she recounted her travels between Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq during the Second World War.⁵³

Uneven Mobility on Similar Routes

As mentioned above, Freya Stark often referred in her writings to her traveling companions as well as to other travelers she encountered on her journeys. In fact, her travels were also an opportunity to meet people. Her journey from Damascus through the desert, for example, was a time for socializing with her three traveling companions.

We are all very contented, and share each other’s provisions, and the ladies give me water from a canvas bag kept cool by the moving air. This is my first journey across the desert; I have no useful knowledge.⁵⁴

This way of traveling contrasted sharply with that of passengers of the Nairn Transport Company. Freya Stark never missed an opportunity to poke fun at the high standards sought by the company and its passengers. Not only was she amused at the luxurious service offered by the company – which “cook[ed] your breakfast-sausage romantically for you in the open desert”⁵⁵ – but she also felt that their passengers traveled in a way that was detached from their surroundings, without coming into contact with the people and the nature around them. “[Crossing the desert] is a wonderful experience – and better in a way in the open car with all the vagaries of native casualness than in the respectable seclusion of Nairn”, she wrote to her friend Viva Jeyes once in Baghdad.⁵⁶ While passengers of the Nairn Transport Company shared a car or bus with other travelers, the high fare effectively restricted the clientele to

⁵² Vincent Capdepuy also mentions Arab nationalism and the discovery of oil as other factors in the emergence (‘resurgence’) of the Syrian-Iraqi space. Vincent Capdepuy, “Proche ou Moyen-Orient?”, 230–234.

⁵³ Freya Stark: *East is West* (London: John Murray, 1945).

⁵⁴ Freya Stark, *Baghdad Sketches*, 5.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁶ Freya Stark, *Letters. Vol. 1*: Letter to Viva Jeyes, 26 October 1929.

a relatively affluent, often European, segment. By deriding travelers with the *Nairn Transport Company* in her letters and travelogues, Freya Stark was also trying to portray herself as an unconventional traveler who was willing to step off the beaten track used by her wealthy compatriots.

The *Rutbah Hotel* also featured prominently in the travel accounts of Freya Stark, who described it as a luxurious hotel where waiters “spontaneously [thought] of hot water” when travelers arrived and where British officials gathered and relaxed in a classy atmosphere.

An then you dine on salmon mayonnaise and custard and jelly and read the sort of notices on the walls that might belong to a golf club-house in the country, and the British officials are all talking shop or shooting or such and look so nice after the French in Syria.⁵⁷

Although Freya Stark was keen to intermingle with people from different backgrounds than her British compatriots, she nevertheless yielded to the opportunities offered by her status. While her traveling companions rested in the car parked in the courtyard, she rented a room in the hotel, as did the British officials. In *Baghdad Sketches*, she admitted that the situation had embarrassed her. But she had not given up her privilege.

Meanwhile the Aleppo ladies and such eat whatever happens to be inside their strange bundles and wait in heaps in the cars in the yard. As I walked across to my room I peered at their dim untidy dishevelment where they lay asleep. I think it is not good manners to be more comfortable than my fellow-travellers; it is a sentiment which never gets put into practice, but I had felt apologetic about it when I went to dine.⁵⁸

On several other occasions, Stark was granted a special status. On arrival at the Iraqi border post of Ramadi, for example, she realized that she had forgotten to apply for a visa to Iraq. Nevertheless, although the legislation prohibited it, she was able to obtain her visa on the spot. She attributed this exception to the fact that she had mentioned eating with former Prime Minister *Jaafar Al-Askari* while in London.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, Freya Stark tended to avoid the places where rich Europeans confined themselves. “I hate this sort of hotel”, she wrote to a friend about the *Windsor Hotel* in Haifa on 9 June 1931, during another trip. “The British are going through on leave, nice and clean and talking in pleasant low voices and looking very much as if they lived in a private club in this foreign land.”⁶⁰

57 Ibid.

58 Freya Stark, *Baghdad Sketches*, 8.

59 Freya Stark, *Beyond Euphrates*: Letter to Robert Stark, Zia Hotel, Baghdad, 26 October 1929.

60 Ibid.: Letter from *Windsor Hotel*, Haifa, 9 June 1931.

While she was fascinated as much as irritated by these high-class travelers, Freya Stark was also intrigued by those who traveled with far less means. On the *Carnaro*, for example, she paid attention to the Jewish passengers in third class. “Down below in the third class they sing their monotonous anthem, or dance in a circle three steps one way one step back, with a grunting cry, evidently next cousin to the Arab dance.”⁶¹ In Syria and Iraq, her attention was drawn to the Muslim pilgrims who traveled through both countries on the way to and from Mecca. In the interwar period, indeed, the development of motorized transport between Baghdad and Damascus diverted many Iraqi, Iranian, Afghan, and even Indian hajj pilgrims from the sea route across the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea that they had previously used to the overland routes through the Syrian desert.⁶² On her journey from Damascus to Baghdad, Freya Stark was also particularly impressed by the buses filled to the brim with pilgrims. She gave several vivid descriptions of her encounter with lorries carrying pilgrims through the Syrian Desert, probably on their way to Mecca.

I thought we knew all about ‘ diligences’, but the wooden atrocities which the poor pilgrims cram into for this long weary journey are quite beyond anything we can remember. I saw one go off, packed so high it was just able not to topple over if it took the corners slowly, with a good stout wooden grating all round to prevent the human contents from bursting out.⁶³

Leaving for Iran few months later, she would give a rather similar description of the pilgrim convoys she encountered on leaving Baghdad.

We got off at five-forty-five; Baghdad looking comparatively clean and empty except for lorry-loads of pilgrims: they travel in sort of cages with wire-netting sides on which the water skins and jars are hung, so that the view from inside is completely hidden.⁶⁴

As these descriptions suggest, the mobility of indigent travelers could be radically different from that of travelers with the *Nairn Transport Company*. From the mid-1920s, pilgrims traveling with very few resources fell back on cheap services to cross the Syrian Desert, despite the travel conditions and the dangers involved.

61 Ibid.: Letter to Venetia Buddicom, S.S. *Carnaro*, 29 September 1929.

62 Luc Chantre: *Pèlerinages d'empire: Une histoire européenne du pèlerinage à la Mecque* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2018), 255–256; Sylvia Chiffolleau: *Le Voyage à La Mecque: Un pèlerinage mondial en terre d'Islam* (Paris: Bélin, 2017), 248–254; César Jaquier: “Motor Cars and Transdesert Traffic: Channelling Mobilities between Iraq and Syria, 1923–30”, in: Tejel, Jordi/Öztan, Ramazan Hakkı (eds.): *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918–1946* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 228–255.

63 Ibid.: Letter to Robert Stark, Zia Hotel, Baghdad, 26 October 1929.

64 Ibid.: Letter to Robert Stark, Hotel de France, Hamadan, 17 April 1930.

While Freya Stark enjoyed a certain social status that enabled her to observe from a distance, and sometimes share at will, the conditions under which less fortunate travelers moved across the Mediterranean and the Syrian Desert, as a woman she experienced more complicated travel conditions than her male British counterparts. Her experiences show that European women were exposed to gender-based judgements by their compatriots when they traveled alone to Iraq. During her first visit to Iraq in 1929, Stark appeared as an “eccentric” traveler in the eyes of the European community, as she traveled alone and at low cost, and resided outside the British-inhabited neighborhoods of Baghdad.⁶⁵ As James Canton has argued, Freya Stark “found herself an outsider to the British colonial community” in this city.⁶⁶ Traveling as a European was frowned upon by Freya Stark’s compatriots, as she later recounted in a speech to the Royal Central Asian Society in London.

‘What is the use of your travels?’ I was asked this once in Persia by an English-woman who evidently disliked me. I think she must have disliked me to ask so unkind a question. She herself, she said, was fully occupied in looking after her husband: she could spare no time to wander in the hills.⁶⁷

But traveling as an independent woman not only met with verbal disapproval, it was also subject to special regulations in the late 1920s. In 1928, the British administration in Iraq issued a set of regulations for “ladies travelling in Iraq”, which stipulated that European and American women were to travel in the company of a man outside the main Iraqi cities, unless they stayed on the main roads or obtained prior permission from the relevant authorities.⁶⁸ As literary scholar Dúnlaith Bird argues, this regulation replicated 19th century European laws that aimed to regulate the mobility of those identified as vagrants as much as to identify them, but this time by targeting the “solitary women traveller”.⁶⁹ Those who posed a threat from the British perspective were European and American women of a certain social status. Freya Stark was well aware of this, as she humorously pointed out in an op-ed published in the *Baghdad Times* that a woman without social standing could “pic-nic off the main road without notifying the Ministry of the Interior”.⁷⁰ In short, what the British commu-

65 “I was soon considered a rebel a dangerous eccentric, or a spy”, wrote Freya Stark in her autobiography (Freya Stark, *Beyond Euphrates*, 86).

66 James Canton, *From Cairo to Baghdad*, 119.

67 Freya Stark: “In defence of travel”, in: *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 23:1 (1936), 104–110, here 104.

68 Thomas Cook & Son: *Cook’s Traveller’s Handbook Palestine and Syria* (London: Simkin Marshall, 1929), 435–436.

69 Dúnlaith Bird: *Travelling in Different Skins: Gender identity in European Women’s Oriental Travels, 1850–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 56–65. On the regulation of prostitution in the interwar Middle East, see Liat Kozma, *Global Women*.

70 Quoted in Dúnlaith Bird, *Travelling in Different Skins*, 63.

nity in Iraq did not like about Freya Stark's way of traveling alone off the beaten track and socializing with the locals was that her behavior could be associated with British women at large. This is clear from a letter Freya Stark sent to her friend Venetia Buddicom from Baghdad on 6 January 1930:

My dear, you can't imagine what a place this is for taking an interest in other people's affairs, nor what a mutual shock my first contact with proper conventional civil service society has caused. No one else (respectable) appears ever to have settled in a shoemaker's home on the banks of the Tigris, nor has anyone succeeded in living in Baghdad on two rupees a day. One lady has asked me if I am not 'lowering the prestige of British womanhood' by sitting in school among the Iraqi girls.⁷¹

In the same spirit, the British and French authorities decided in the mid-1920s to ban European women artists from entering Iraq and Syria, respectively. The British were the first to take this step to ensure that European women could not be associated with prostitutes, as this would have damaged the "prestige" of the British nation.⁷² The French, for their part, decided not to impose a total ban on French artists entering Lebanon and Syria but to refuse visas to any woman whose status as an artist was not "clearly established".⁷³

In sum, French and British colonial administrations dealt with the mobility of women between Europe and the Middle East in a different way to that of men in the interwar period, seeking to regulate and even prohibit their movements. Based on a sexist and racist discourse, these measures aimed to preserve the "prestige" of European nations. The treatment of European women travelers shows the development by the French and British Mandate authorities of their own mobility regimes based on the differentiated promotion, regulation, and prevention of various patterns of mobility.⁷⁴ Not only were the different kinds of travelers moving between Europe, Syria, and Iraq subject to varying conditions in terms of comfort, speed, and safety – as we have seen from Freya Stark's descriptions of the travelers she encountered

71 Freya Stark, *Letters. Vol. 1: Letter to Venetia Buddicom, Baghdad, 6 January 1930*.

72 Satow (British consul, Beirut) to Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, London, 27 July 1927, TNA, CO 732/28/14.

73 High Commissioner for Syria and Lebanon to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 28 January 1928, Centre des Archives diplomatiques de La Courneuve (CADC), 50CPOM310; Delegate (High Commission, Beirut) to Union Artistique de France, 10 August 1931, CADC, 50CPOM544; High Commissioner for Syria and Lebanon to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 December 1931, *Ibid.*

74 Tejel/Öztan (eds.), *Regimes of Mobility*.

along her journeys – but they were also treated in different ways by the French and British Mandate powers.⁷⁵

II Yusuf Ghanima

Yusuf Rizq Allah Ghanima (1885–1950) was born and raised in Baghdad in an influential family of Chaldean Catholics. In his lifetime, he engaged in many diverse activities that made him known as a merchant, politician, intellectual, journalist, and historian. In 1908, in the wake of the Young Turk Revolution that introduced increased press freedom in the Ottoman Empire, Ghanima founded a weekly newspaper in Baghdad, *Seda Babel* (Echo of Babylon) which covered a wide range of social, cultural, and political topics. In 1925, the year he was elected to the Iraqi parliament for Baghdad, he also directed a political newspaper for some months, *Al-Siyasa*. Well known to scholars for his history of Iraqi Jews, Yusuf Ghanima also published several essays and books on Iraq's economy.⁷⁶ He also served several times as Minister of Finance, including under the government of Prime Minister Tawfiq al-Suwaidi, which was formed in April 1929. He held this position when he left for Europe in July 1929, but a cabinet reshuffle at the end of August, while he was in London, saw him replaced by Yasin al-Hashimi.⁷⁷

Experiencing Luxury, Solitude, and Distance

In July 1929, Yusuf Ghanima decided to travel to Europe to seek treatment for his heart disease, which Iraqi doctors were unable to cure. He was given two months' sick leave and the blessing of King Faysal. His journey took him from Iraq to Europe and back by two different routes: through Egypt on the way out and through Turkey on the way back. For the round trip, Ghanima combined numerous trips by car, train, and ship that carried him across and around the Syrian Desert and

75 Valeska Huber: "Multiple Mobilities: Über den Umgang mit verschiedenen Mobilitätsformen um 1900", in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 36:2 (2010), 317–341.

76 Kamil Sulayman al-Jabburi: *Mu'jam al-udabā' min al-'aṣr al-jāhili ḥattā sanat 2002* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmīyya, 2003), 50–51. See also Orit Bashkin: *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 44, 48; Aline Schlaepfer: *Les intellectuels juifs de Bagdad: Discours et allégeances (1908–1951)* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2016), 47. On *Seda Babel* ('Echo of Babylon'), see also the description on the Library of Congress website: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2020741464/> (accessed 12 March 2022).

77 Peter Sluglett: *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 108–109; Justine Stievenard: "L'implication de l'armée dans la politique irakienne de 1933 à 1936, une étude de cas à travers le personnage de Bakr Sidqi", 2018, <https://dumas.s.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-02155577> (accessed 12 March 2022), 108–111.

the Mediterranean. While highlighting Ghanima's use of this multi-modal transport system, this section examines his perceptions, doubts, and fears along the way. Thus, by foregrounding his journey as a process, it aims to show that traveling could be a major and above all transformative undertaking in the interwar period, despite the ease and comfort provided by developments in transport.⁷⁸

Yusuf Ghanima and his family traveled from Baghdad to Damascus with Debesh & Akkash.⁷⁹ On the way, the small group stopped for the night in Rutbah. Like Freya Stark, Ghanima was surprised by the amenities and services offered at the hotel. But unlike her, he seemed more amazed than displeased by the pomp and splendor of the site. He described the "electric fans, the fresh water and the beds" provided in the hotel, which gave them comfort in the sweltering desert heat. The presence of a telegraph station in this remote location was another element of importance to Ghanima, which he mentioned in his description. Ghanima made sure to use it to send a message to his mother in Baghdad.⁸⁰ As will become apparent later, Ghanima frequently mentioned in his travel diary the various means of communication that helped him keep in touch with his relatives while he was away. After a few hours of rest in Rutbah, the family set off again in the evening and drove all night until they arrived in Damascus the next morning.

Ghanima's state of mind when leaving Baghdad is reflected in a letter he wrote to his mother from Damascus on 26 July, in which he explained that the reason he remained unmoved during the farewell was due to his strong and impassive nature. Yet, in reality, he was filled with fear when he left Baghdad.

Indeed, my dear beloved mother, in Baghdad I bid farewell to my love, my reverence, my hopes, my pain, my people, my compatriots, whereas I do not know if I will return there safe and sound or if my life of service to the country will come to an end, while I am in a far away land.⁸¹

After a few days in Syria and Lebanon, Ghanima continued his journey to Europe alone, leaving behind his wife and children, who remained in a Lebanese summer

⁷⁸ On 19th century sea travel as a transformative experience during which passengers "re-worked ideas about themselves and their worlds", see Tamson Pietsch: "A British sea: Making sense of global space in the late nineteenth century", in: *Journal of Global History* 5:3 (2010), 423–446, here 443–446.

⁷⁹ For the drive to Damascus, they paid 250 rupees – still the official currency in Iraq at the time – which was equivalent to about 19 pounds, the same amount that the Nairn Transport Company charged for one person. For information on Iraqi currency and conversion rates, see "Coinage of Iraq", in: *Maps of Iraq with Notes for Visitors* (Baghdad: Government of Iraq, 1929), 14.

⁸⁰ Yusuf Ghanima, *Rihla ilā Urubbā* 1929, 15.

⁸¹ The letter is reproduced in the introduction to Yusuf Ghanima's travelogue, written by his son Harith Y. Ghanima on pages 13–14.

resort. He first traveled by car from Beirut to Haifa where he stayed at the Hotel Central and visited a friend. At the end of a long and warm discussion, however, he felt sorrow at being separated from his family (*'alam al-firāq*). His friend therefore asked his children to take him for a drive in the mountains to relieve his mind. The next day, Ghanima took a train from Haifa to Cairo and traveled in the utmost comfort, as the railway company, having learned that he was the Iraqi Minister of Finance, gave him a first-class compartment with six empty seats. He therefore made the journey of 14 hours and 35 minutes without talking to anyone, an experience he greatly disliked, as he noted in his diary: "It was tough for me, and I damned the rank that prevents [a human] from the pleasure of familiarity with one's fellows."⁸² The privileges afforded by his standing resulted in a lack of society for Yusuf Ghanima.

His stay in Egypt was again a time of intense activity and meetings. Together with Rashid al-Khuja, an Iraqi notable based in Cairo at the time of his journey, Ghanima visited the Matossian cigarette factories as well as agricultural experimentation sites. He also traveled to the Nile Delta to study Egypt's extensive system of dams, which he could compare to the Hindiya Dam south of Baghdad. After a couple of days in Cairo, Ghanima traveled by train to Alexandria to board a ship for Europe.⁸³ After completing border formalities and buying a ticket, he boarded the *Halwan* for Brindisi, Italy.

Far from the friends and colleagues he had in Cairo, he was once again struck by a strong feeling of loneliness. "People were saying goodbye, hugging each other and shaking hands, while I was alone and remote, waving goodbye to my family from afar but hearing no response", he noted on 3 April as he was about to leave the Egyptian coast.⁸⁴ The sea voyage that followed was marked by luxury and solitude, just like the train journey that had taken him from Haifa to Cairo. Ghanima was impressed by the opulence of the ship: the spacious lounges, the electric lights and fans, the wireless telegraph and postal facilities, the lifts, the cinema, the orchestra that played during meals, and the fine cuisine.⁸⁵ But once again, it was in the midst of this opulence that he was struck by a feeling of solitude.

82 Yusuf Ghanima, *Rihla ilā Urubbā* 1929, 23.

83 Alexandria had long been a transit port on various shipping lines crossing the Mediterranean between Europe, Egypt, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Marie-Françoise Berneron-Couvennes: *Les Messageries Maritimes: L'essor d'une grande compagnie de navigation française, 1851–1894* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2007), 126–128, 435–437; Xavier Guillot: "From One Globalization to Another: In Search of the Seeds of Modern Tourism in the Levant, a Western Perspective", in: Remi F. Daher (ed.): *Tourism in the Middle East: Continuity, Change and Transformation* (Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2007), 95–110.

84 Yusuf Ghanima, *Rihla ilā Urubbā* 1929, 29.

85 Ibid., 29.

The sea was calm, restful and so perfectly fine and yet I felt pain and was grieved by loneliness; I remembered the day I spent in the train from Haifa to Cairo. I recommend to all those who want to travel to do so in second class because they [can] get to know the people around them.⁸⁶

Whilst traveling, Ghanima became more conscious of the distance between himself and his loved ones, which gave him a sense of wistfulness that was made even more painful by the solitude. This mix of feelings was accompanied by a fascination with rapid means of communication. On board the ship, he noticed that some passengers were receiving telegrams from their relatives. While the wireless telegraph station at Rutbah made communication possible in the middle of the desert, the telegraph on the *Halwan* even allowed contact with the outside world while on the move.⁸⁷

The same feelings accompanied him throughout his time in Europe. Mentions of these emotions punctuated his diary, contrasting with the many visits, meetings, press interviews, and medical appointments he had in Italy, France, and Britain. In Rome, for example, he once arrived at his hotel to find it full of visitors who reminded him of his absent wife and children. It seemed to him that “Providence did not want life to be good and whole in this world, but wanted it to remain always imperfect so that humans would think that true happiness was not of this world.”⁸⁸ On the train from Rome to Paris, he thought about Iraq and tried to remember whom and what he loved. “My soul was craving to see my life partner, my own blood, as well as my mother, so much so that I started to sing Iraqi songs.”⁸⁹

The medical examination and subsequent treatment also produced anxiety. On 19 August, he went with a friend who was living in France to see Doctor Raoul Boulin, who enjoyed a great reputation as a diabetes specialist.⁹⁰ After examining him, the doctor diagnosed him with a serious but non-life-threatening inflammation of the heart and prescribed him a treatment consisting of five injections, plenty of rest and abstinence from smoking for a few days. Ghanima was much troubled by the diagnosis, “especially because [he] was far from his wife and children”, as he wrote down.⁹¹ The next day he went to the radiologist who took an X-ray of his heart and confirmed the inflammation. He received the first treatment the same day and the other four injections over the next few days, which he spent resting, eating light meals, and

86 Ibid., 30.

87 On radiotelegraphy on board ships in the early 20th century, see Roland Wenzlhuemer: “The ship, the media, and the world: conceptualizing connections in global history”, in: *Journal of Global History* 11:2 (2016), 163–186.

88 Yusuf Ghanima, *Rihla ilā Urubbā* 1929, 36.

89 Ibid., 47.

90 Paul Rambert: “Raoul Boulin”, in: *Diabetes* 8:3 (1959), 234–235.

91 Yusuf Ghanima, *Rihla ilā Urubbā* 1929, 49.

thinking about his loved ones in Iraq and Lebanon.⁹² He also received visits from several Iraqi acquaintances living or spending time in Paris, whose company brought him closer to his country. Ghanima also maintained contact with his mother by correspondence throughout his journey. When he was in London, she even sent him a photograph of her, which he promptly took to a photographer to have enlarged.⁹³

After renewed soreness during his stay in London, which required a visit to a doctor, Ghanima had no more pain during the rest of the journey. He left Paris on 11 September, after about a month in Europe, and traveled back by the Simplon-Orient Express railway, which took him overland from Paris to Istanbul via Dijon, Lausanne, Venice, Zagreb, Belgrade, and Sofia in four days (including a one-and-a-half-day stopover to visit Venice).⁹⁴ The Orient Express had been running from Paris to Istanbul since the 1880s on a northern route, before being reoriented after the war to this more southerly route, taking advantage of the recently opened Simplon tunnel. In the aftermath of the First World War, moreover, the Baghdad Railway had been completed to Aleppo and Nusaybin. Since 1927 the *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits* had been operating the Taurus Express between Istanbul and Aleppo, thereby extending the Orient Express to the south-east.⁹⁵ Thanks to these developments in rail transport, Ghanima traveled all the way from Paris to Aleppo by train. He then drove to Beirut and the mountain resort of Aley where he met up with his family. After a few days in Lebanon, they drove back to Baghdad through the Syrian Desert.

While Ghanima's journey highlights the coexistence and combination of several transport systems that profoundly transformed the possibilities of travel between Iraq and Europe in the interwar period, his perceptions and feelings as conveyed in the diaries bring another perspective to this account of faster and easier travel. Starting from Ghanima's experience of the journey *being made* makes apparent his growing sense of remoteness, that is, his awareness of geographical distance and social separation. This observation casts a different light on the impact of the developments in transport. Although the expanding transport infrastructure resulted in shorter travel times and thus, in a way, in the "shrinking of the world", it did not

⁹² Ibid., 50.

⁹³ Ibid., 66.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 66–71.

⁹⁵ Amit Bein: *Kemalist Turkey and the Middle East: International Relations in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 181, 205–206; Sean McMeekin: *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 32–53; Morton B. Stratton: "British Railways and Motor Roads in the Middle East, 1918–1930", in: *Economic Geography* 20:2 (1944), 116–129, here 129.

mean the annihilation of “in-between spaces”.⁹⁶ Ghanima was not left untouched by the space and time of his journey, quite the contrary. His trip across land and sea made him aware of the distance separating his loved ones and his beloved Iraq from the main European capitals. His perception of remoteness took shape while he was in transit and affected him in moments of solitude. Illness and fear of death made this perception of distance even more acute. Here, micro-analysis makes room for the doubts, fears, and awareness of distance that went along with the transregional mobility produced by transport developments, as much as the speed and comfort they offered.

Visits and Encounters Along the Way: Multiple Identifications

Although health was the main motivation for Yusuf Ghanima's voyage to Europe, he also acted as a tourist and a pilgrim during his trip, both in the Eastern Mediterranean and in Europe. This section focuses on the visits and activities he undertook during his journey, which bring out his interests and allow for reflection on his various identifications and the question of cross-cultural exchange. Yusuf Ghanima first combined his trip with a few days in Syria and Lebanon with his family. In Damascus, they stayed two nights at the Victoria Hotel and made various cultural visits. On the first day, they walked around the city and visited various sights, such as the Umayyad Mosque, the Tomb of Salah ad-Din, and the 'Azm Palace. The imposing 18th century palace had been home to the *Institut Français d'Archéologie et d'Art Musulman* since 1922, which preserved and exhibited Islamic antiquities.⁹⁷ Ghanima was impressed by the building, but not so much by the objects displayed inside.

[The 'Azm Palace] is really beautiful, but the remains there do not deserve to be called “mawzat khāna” because in the Iraqi museum there are many more valuable objects than in this one and there is no reason to compare them.⁹⁸

Ghanima's remark reflects both his interest in the remains of an Arab-Islamic past shared with the Syrians and his pride of being Iraqi. On the second day, they visited the Syrian Museum and several churches, and took an excursion outside Damascus to see the house where King Faysal of Iraq lived during his short reign in Syria. The next day they drove to Beirut and stopped on the way to visit the site of the Battle of Maysalun, where French troops defeated the army of the short-lived Arab Kingdom

⁹⁶ On rail travel in 19th century Europe, which supposedly eliminated the experience of ‘spatial distance’, see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*.

⁹⁷ Idir Ouahes: *Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate: Cultural Imperialism and the Workings of Empire* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 68.

⁹⁸ Yusuf Ghanima, *Rihla ilā Urubbā* 1929, 19. “Mawzat khāna” being the Farsi for “museum”.

of Faysal on 24 July 1920.⁹⁹ Ghanima and his family visited the tomb of the Arab General Yusuf al-'Azma and those of various French soldiers.¹⁰⁰ This excursion can be regarded as a form of heritage tourism, for the site of the Battle of Maysalun gradually became a monument to the recent past during the interwar period, serving in Syrian nationalist discourse as a symbolic reminder of the struggle for independence. Nationalist commemorations already took place in the 1920s in the form of secular pilgrimages to this battle site.¹⁰¹ As can be seen, this place was also important to an Iraqi like Yusuf Ghanima.

Once in Lebanon, the family visited several tourists sites in Beirut before going up to Brummana, one of the important Lebanese summering sites of the time, where Ghanima paid a visit to the Iraqi politician 'Abd al-Muhsin Sa'dun, who was spending the summer in Lebanon. During the few days they spent together, Ghanima and his family experienced all the activities characteristic of modern tourism (sightseeing, cultural and leisure activities, break from routine).¹⁰² The first part of Ghanima's journey therefore provides a fitting illustration of the development of tourism and summer vacationing between Iraq and Syria/Lebanon in the interwar years and how these two practices could mix.

In the interwar years, the Eastern Mediterranean attracted tourists and summer visitors from the North-Atlantic world as well as from the various countries of the former Ottoman Empire. These tourists shared certain practices, such as the places and summer resorts they visited along the way and the hotels where they stayed. This is particularly true of Brummana, where Ghanima's friend and colleague spent the summer and where Freya Stark stayed for a few weeks before leaving for Baghdad.¹⁰³ But these common travel practices, by making these travelers from different backgrounds interact, could also highlight their differences. Ghanima recounted an amusing anecdote about his encounter with American tourists in Damascus, which

99 On the Battle of Maysalun, see Philip Khoury: *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 97–99.

100 Yusuf Chanima, *Rihla ilā Urubbā* 1929, 20.

101 Elie Podeh: "Celebrating Continuity: The Role of State Holidays in Syria (1918–2010)", in: *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40:4 (2913), 428–456, here 434; Review from the American Consulate General, Beirut, 1 September 1933, NARA, Syria Internal Affairs, 1930–44, roll 7.

102 Eric Zuelow: *A History of Modern Tourism* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 9. On the tourist journey as a 'break' in the life of the traveler, much like pilgrimage, see Daniel H. Olsen: "Religion, Pilgrimage and Tourism in the Middle East", in: Timothy J. Dallen (ed.): *Routledge Handbook on Tourism in the Middle East and North Africa* (London: Routledge, 2019), 109–124.

103 On the development of summer tourism in Brummana and how it transformed the village, see Richard Alouche: *Évolution d'un Centre de Villégiature au Liban (Broummana)* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1970).

taught him that he – or, in this case, his child – could become an object of interest to tourists imbued with orientalist imaginaries.

When we arrived at the Victoria Hotel [in Damascus], where we stayed, American tourists were standing around taking pictures, and when my son Ḥārith stuck his head out of the car window, they were surprised to see him wearing Arab clothes (the dishdasha, the kufiya and the ‘iqal) and after asking my permission, they started taking pictures of him.¹⁰⁴

In that moment, his son became the focus of the orientalist gaze of these American tourists, who projected onto him their “desire to identify the already defined signs of exoticism as exotic.”¹⁰⁵

Throughout the rest of his trip, Yusuf Ghanima undertook many tourist activities as well. He went to the pyramids of Giza in Egypt, visited the Lateran Museum, the catacombs and the Vatican in Rome. In Paris he walked to the Pantheon and the Sorbonne, paid a visit to the Grand Mosque as well as to the Louvre, climbed the Eiffel Tower and took the train to Versailles. In London he visited the Science Museum and the British Museum. Besides visiting these emblematic monuments and institutions, Ghanima was also interested in the cultural and social life he observed here and there. In the Villa Borghese gardens in Rome, he watched a group of people enjoying the performance of acrobats, listening to music, and dancing.¹⁰⁶ In Paris, he visited the famous and chic department store *Bon Marché* where he found all the wares attractively presented in accordance with “French taste”.¹⁰⁷ These excursions testify to his interest in and appreciation of the cultural life and history of the European cities he visited.

At the same time, Ghanima drew comparisons between the practices and habits he observed in Europe and Iraqi customs. His observations were mainly concerned with women’s clothing and the question of nudity. While visiting the Vatican Museum, Ghanima witnessed a scene where a young woman who was warm took off her cloak, which uncovered her shoulders as her outfit was sleeveless. An employee then asked her to cover herself, first gently, then by raising his voice as she had not heard him. “Even in Europe”, Ghanima commented, “short sleeves are not welcome.” And he added that this was ignored by those in Iraq who were trying to follow the example of the Europeans. “In Rome, women’s clothing stops an inch below the knee when it is short, or goes down to the feet. But Orientals who imitate [Westerners], they do so blindly.”¹⁰⁸ On other occasions, however, Ghanima pointed to cultural differences.

¹⁰⁴ Yusuf Ghanima, *Rihla ilā Urubbā* 1929, 19.

¹⁰⁵ Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers*, 48.

¹⁰⁶ Yusuf Ghanima, *Rihla ilā Urubbā* 1929, 37.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 48.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 37.

During his one-and-a-half-day stay in Venice, he made an excursion to the Lido island, where he walked along the beaches watching people swimming in the sea and sunbathing. Ghanima described the place as a holiday destination for many Europeans and Americans, where men and women bathed together. Women, he pointed out, would get out of the water and sit in the sun to get a tan and give their bodies an attractive colour.¹⁰⁹ In Paris, Ghanima also attended two cabaret shows. During his first stay in the French capital, he went to the *Moulin Rouge* one evening, where he watched two performances. He did not enjoy them at all, however, finding them “close to debauchery (*khalā'a*) [...] because the women were naked.” He nevertheless appreciated the other performances, which stood out for the “refined art of dance and the lightness of the movements.”¹¹⁰ On his return from London, he spent an evening at the *Folies Bergères*, where he had a similar experience. “If one excludes the nudity (*'arā*) of the women, which I disapprove of, whatever people say as an excuse, this dance hall is very important from the point of view of performance, dance and clothing.”¹¹¹ Yusuf Ghanima's journey was motivated by the desire to discover Europe and “construct links between the self [...] and the Other”, just like a tourist or an anthropologist.¹¹² This interest manifested itself in the search for a shared cultural heritage but also in the perception of differences in terms of customs.

Ghanima's journey also involved a form of religious tourism, even pilgrimage. In Syria and Lebanon, as well as in Europe, he visited many Christian religious sites. The purpose of his stay in Rome was to “receive the blessing of the Supreme Pontiff”.¹¹³ During the four days he spent in the city, he met with various important religious dignitaries, went to the Vatican several times, and visited numerous churches. The account of his meeting with the Pope is also an important part of his travelogue. Ghanima described in detail his own preparation and the lengthy procedures before arriving in the room where he was to wait for the Pope. This moment provided another instance of cultural dialogue. As Ghanima had dressed for the occasion in a tailcoat and put on a *sidāra* (an Iraqi style of headwear), one of the masters of ceremonies came and asked him to remove his hat out of respect for the Pope. But the Reverend Paul who was accompanying Ghanima intervened in Italian to say that the *sidāra* was a mark of honour in Iraq.¹¹⁴ This episode once again shows the importance that Yusuf Ghanima gave to traditional Iraqi clothes and underlines the different meaning people could attribute to these external attributes. Interestingly,

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 67.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 48.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 65.

¹¹² Ellen Badone/Sharon R. Roseman: “Approaches to the Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism”, in: Ellen Badone/Sharon R. Roseman (eds.): *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 8.

¹¹³ Yusuf Chanima, *Rihla ilā Urubbā* 1929, 34.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 41–42.

it required the intervention of an interpreter – Reverend Paul – to allow for cultural understanding. On arrival, Pope Pius XI gave Ghanima his blessing and said he would pray to God to bestow healing on him. Then the two men discussed the situation of Catholics in Iraq for about twenty minutes. Ghanima responded to the Pope's questions by assuring him that Catholics enjoyed a good situation in Iraq. He noted, however, that their schools were lagging far behind. The Pope recalled the importance of having a school near every church, and then withdrew after some formalities.¹¹⁵

Yusuf Ghanima's stay in Rome points out the depth of his sense of Christian belonging. More generally, his journey from Iraq to Europe brings to light the multiplicity of his identifications, which become apparent through his visits and encounters but also through his reflections. Ghanima appears both as an Iraqi and a Christian; as an Arab eager to remember the fight for independence led by Faysal's forces, a heritage shared also specifically with the Syrians; as a self-proclaimed "Oriental" when he points out cultural differences between the "West" and the "East"; but also as an intellectual and modern tourist drawn by the historical and cultural heritage of the Middle Eastern and European worlds between which he wished to build bridges.

Conclusion

In the 1920s, the expansion of motorized transport across the Syrian Desert greatly facilitated the movement of people and goods between Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad. At the same time, the progress of transdesert transportation stimulated the development of an overland route between Syria and Iraq that was integrated into transregional and even global transport networks. The transdesert transport system became interwoven with pre-existing rail and sea transport networks in the Eastern Mediterranean, across the Mediterranean, and within Europe, bringing London within ten days of Baghdad. From the mid-1920s onwards, the Syrian Desert thus became the site of intense movements of people, goods, and mail that flowed between Iraq and the North Atlantic world.

Reflecting on the transregional mobilities and connections that developed between Iraq and Europe with the development of this vast web of transport networks should be done from various perspectives. While the interactions arising from the incorporation of the Arab provinces of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul into the British colonial empire have received much scholarly attention,¹¹⁶ the social, economic, and

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 45–46.

¹¹⁶ To name but a few: Susan Pedersen: "Getting Out of Iraq—in 1932: The League of Nations and the Road to Normative Statehood", in: *The American Historical Review* 115:4 (2010), 975–1000; Priya Satia: "Developing Iraq: Britain, India and the Redemption of Empire and Technology

environmental dimensions of the connections fostered by these expanding transport networks deserve further exploration. Furthermore, the study of these interactions would benefit from being conducted at multiple scales of analysis in order to highlight different actors, dynamics, and geographies. This chapter has drawn on the field of global micro-history and chosen to start from the individual experience of a British and an Iraqi traveler that journeyed between London and Baghdad and vice versa, rather than from the heads of the multimodal transport system linking Iraq to European countries. Besides providing insights into the organization and operation of the transport systems and the practicalities of travel, the accounts of these two travelers have shed light on what it meant to be traveling along these routes in the interwar period.

By following Freya Stark and Yusuf Ghanima on their geographical and inner journeys, this chapter has sought to “challenge simplistic ideas about the ease of mobility in the past”,¹¹⁷ but also to foreground travel as a meaningful process, in contrast to some studies centered on the abstract categories of “mobility” and “connection”, which sometimes perceive it as a meaningless and uneventful experience. Stark’s and Ghanima’s travel accounts, show that for both of them the journey was a transformative experience in terms of their perceptions of space and distance. The journey across the Syrian Desert put Iraq on Freya Stark’s mental map, broadening her horizons but also changing her way of ordering the world, as she felt she was entering another part of the globe, quite distinct from the Mediterranean basin, which she regarded as “the real East”. For Yusuf Ghanima, the trip to Europe was, in some ways, a harrowing experience, which made him aware of the geographical distance between Britain and Iraq and led him to endure a social separation that caused him to feel homesick and nostalgic for his family. Both travel experiences invite us to refine our understanding of technological developments in transport and communication beyond the mere production of time-space compression.

Furthermore, examining these two travelers’ experiences has revealed interactions and encounters that might have remained unnoticed by approaching the transregional connections from a different angle. While rail, sea, and motorized transport networks facilitated movements between London and Baghdad – and thus enhanced interactions within the British Empire – the travel accounts of Freya Stark and Yusuf Ghanima show the transimperial dimension of their journey.¹¹⁸ It was in

in the First World War”, in: *Past & Present* 197 (2007), 211–255; Peter Sluglett: *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (London/New York, I.B. Tauris: 2007); Charles Tripp: *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹¹⁷ John-Paul A. Ghobrial, “Moving Stories and What They Tell Us”, 246.

¹¹⁸ On transimperial history, see Daniel Hedinger/Nadin Heé: “Transimperial History – Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition”, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 16:4 (2018), 429–452.

Paris that Ghanima went to find a doctor to treat him, not in London. During his journey, moreover, he took advantage of the extensive transport infrastructure to go sightseeing in Syria and Lebanon, take a study tour in Egypt, visit Rome and the Vatican where he had long wanted to meet the Pope, and pay visits to friends from the Iraqi diaspora. Freya Stark spent time in her cottage in Italy before crossing the Mediterranean, stayed for a few weeks in Brummana in the Lebanese mountains, and then continued her trip to Iran after a few months' stay in Iraq. In the course of their journey, Stark and Ghanima interacted and built relationships with various people and places between and beyond the French and British empires.

Their journey, like any voyage, was also characterized by encounters and exchanges with people from different linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds. Ghanima's journey reveals his sense of belonging to the Iraqi nation, his attachment to a common heritage with the Syrians, his fraternity with Arab counterparts, and his allegiance to the Catholic Church. Beyond these multiple identifications, his trip was an opportunity to forge intercultural bonds, but also to become aware of his attachment to values and customs different from those he observed. Other encounters, such as the one with American tourists, made him aware of his reification as "Other" through the eyes of some. Freya Stark also experienced the manner in which she was regarded and perceived, albeit in a different way. Her time in Iraq exposed her to the disapproving gaze of her British compatriots who disliked the way she traveled and interacted with local people. Stark was indeed eager to escape from the exclusive British environment to mingle with the local population and the lower social classes, even if she sometimes accepted the privileges of her status. Based on gendered considerations, the disapproval of her compatriots also translated into regulations that severely restricted her freedom of movement in Iraq.

Finally, Freya Stark's travel writing draws attention to the differences in access and experience of mobility between Europe and Iraq. As a lone European woman, she experienced discriminatory mobility regimes. Moreover, her constant attention to the people she crossed paths with during her journey highlights the very different travel conditions under which other groups of travelers moved across the Mediterranean and the Syrian Desert, particularly Muslim pilgrims heading to Mecca. Her travel accounts serve as a reminder that the mobility made possible by transport developments could take many forms depending on social and material factors – but also on the (dis)approval of those in authority.