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## Configuring Mesopotamia: Regional Signifiers and the Many Locations of the ‘Land Between the Rivers’

### Summary

It seems a travesty to reiterate exactly what we mean by ‘Mesopotamia’: The tautological qualities of Greek *mésos* (‘middle,’ ‘in between’) and *potamós* (‘stream,’ ‘river’) often rule out further elaboration of its origins and the assumed self-evident nature of its current application. Yet regional concepts are not stable. Their delineation may be defined according to a complex set of attributes not related to physical borders alone. I consider here the changing meanings of ‘Mesopotamia’ as a name for the drainage of the Euphrates and Tigris from the 2nd millennium BCE until the present day. In conclusion, I argue that current notions of ‘Mesopotamia’ are a product of the First World War, and hence far from unproblematic references to a distant historical past to which they bear no inherent relation.

Keywords: Mesopotamia; Ancient Near East; orientalism; region; historical geography; First World War

Es mag überflüssig erscheinen, sich erneut mit der genauen Bedeutung des Begriffs ‚Mesopotamien‘ zu befassen. Die auf der Hand liegende Bedeutung der griechischen Wörter *mésos* (‚mitte‘, ‚zwischen‘) und *potamós* (‚Strom‘, ‚Fluss‘) verhindert meist eine nähere Beschäftigung mit dem Ursprung und der vermeintlich offensichtlichen heutigen Verwendung des Wortes ‚Mesopotamien‘. Doch regionale Begriffe sind nicht statisch. Sie werden nicht nur durch physische Grenzlinien definiert,

sondern vielfältige Merkmale. Ich untersuche hier die wechselnden Bedeutungen des Begriffs ‚Mesopotamien‘ für das Einzugsgebiet von Euphrat und Tigris vom 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr. bis heute und komme zu dem Ergebnis, dass die heutige Vorstellung von ‚Mesopotamien‘ in der Zeit des Ersten Weltkriegs entstanden ist und damit nur wenig zu tun hat mit neutralen Quellenhinweisen auf die ferne Vergangenheit.

Keywords: Mesopotamien; Alter Vorderer Orient; Orientalismus; Region; Historische Geographie; Erster Weltkrieg

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## 1 Introduction

'Mesopotamia' conjures up a multitude of meanings. Far from being a mere inconspicuous designator of a historical region, it carries the trappings of cultures, civilizations, and epochs. These aspects play complex roles both in specialist and general discourses of Western societies. In an important article from 1998, Zainab Bahrani eruditely exposed the Orientalist notions underlying the use of 'Mesopotamia' as a regional concept in contemporary scholarship. Through a discussion of the term's discursive ability to separate in a temporal dimension the past of the land of the Tigris and Euphrates (Mesopotamia) from the land of the present (Iraq, Syria, Turkey), she demonstrated that 'Mesopotamia' as a signifier serves to further imperialist notions alienating past and present spheres of landscape and history.<sup>1</sup>

The suggestive powers of Mesopotamia have, however, been more sparingly discussed when turning to its spatial properties. Coined by the Greeks and appropriated by the Romans, the tautological simplicity of 'the land between the rivers' often renders a discussion of the geographical space signified by the word 'Mesopotamia' a fairly academic exercise (another tautology). And yet the widely applied binding of cultural, temporal, and spatial properties that is contained within this word surely extends beyond the confinements of its Classical origins. Though 'Mesopotamia' has expanded significantly from its primeval role as the name for the land east of the Euphrates Bend, neither of the Roman geographers who are said to have conceived of Mesopotamia as encompassing all of the land between the Euphrates and the Tigris, from the Taurus to the Persian Gulf, used it with the same array of cultural qualities in mind as those applied by modern scholarship.

I propose here to investigate the spatial configuration of 'Mesopotamia' in Western intellectual thought, from the Bronze Age Ancient Near East and up to the present day. This review serves to indicate that the 'Mesopotamia' we talk of today is, for all practical purposes, of a much more recent origin than hitherto assumed, and as such much more problematic in its incorporation into historical and archaeological analyses than is often believed.

## 2 Ordering space: the concept of region

In order for us to consider the use of 'Mesopotamia' as a regional concept, we need first to briefly outline what we understand by 'region'. One aspect of this problem is the conceptual ordering of physical space as a working taxonomy for our understanding. Places, regions, and continents must necessarily be subjected to some mode of classification in order for us to make sense of their particular characteristics. This can hardly be deemed unwarranted in itself, but it does merit an enquiry into the origin of our concepts and the etymology of their use, so as to understand their heuristic qualities as well as their discursive drawbacks. Such an enquiry is not necessarily aimed at arriving at any pristine order of things, merely to elucidate the biographies of the concepts by which we make sense of any particular geographical area. We cannot pretend to adhere to any neutral concept – the word itself precludes such a notion – but we can, and should, strive to articulate the origin of our codifications, and our own, by default dynamic, understanding of their nature.

Approaches to region in the field of geography have seen some noticeable change over the last two decades.<sup>2</sup> The deceptively simple triad of place (*topos*), region (*khoro*), and earth (*ge*), in which the concept of region is normally considered, encompasses a number of aspects not merely attributable to a differentiation of scale, as would be assumed if considering geography from the safe abode of Euclidean geometrics.<sup>3</sup> For preliminary purposes, we may define chorography as an understanding of the relation of spaces, set apart from topography, which is the knowledge of place, and geography, which is the understanding of the earth as a whole. In other words, regions, borne by a relational taxonomy of spaces, constitute a particular ordering of landscape, a binding of various principal characteristics through the disregarding of others. Places, in the words of Yi-Fu Tuan, are experienced, whereas regions are conceptualized.<sup>4</sup> Thus, whereas toponyms can be considered consistent through time in that they refer, at least in theory, to the same physical place, regions are dynamic concepts, shaped and altered by human discourse and tradition. To historians, this dialectic is perhaps more readily accepted

1 Bahrani 1998.

2 Entrikin 2011.

3 Curry 2005.

4 Tuan 1977 in Entrikin 2011, 347.

when looking at cartography, where the long-held objective properties of the map has now given way to an appreciation of its discursive connotations as a medium of power and a conveyor of a certain ordering of the world.<sup>5</sup>

The impact of discourse on the conceptualization of space forms one acutely relevant topic of discussion in post-colonial research on and in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> At a heuristic level, Western scholarship employs an array of orientaling regional concepts in describing this region. Though explicitly recognized as such by most authors, the etymological origins of these concepts are often couched in a temporal distancing from the present based on the apparent assumption that remoteness in time enforces political neutrality and scientific objectivity in the present. Another unwarranted implication of such a discourse is that such terms, in being perceived as objective and politically neutral, are then also considered semantically stable, which is rarely the case upon closer inspection. Even fairly modern examples, e.g., ‘The Middle East’ or ‘The Fertile Crescent’, are not devoid of conceptual change. While the first is traditionally conceived of as invented by the naval historian Alfred T. Mahan (1840–1914), and the second the brainchild of archaeologist and historian James H. Breasted (1865–1935), recent surveys have pointed to their constantly changing semantic and conceptual outlines.<sup>7</sup> Regional concepts perceived as originating in a more distant past should therefore lead us to scrutinize their meaning accordingly. ‘Levant’, a French term originating in the Middle Ages, to take one such older example, still maintains considerable pedigree in the study of pre-Roman periods today.<sup>8</sup> Critical concerns evident in Islamic archaeology consider the use of the same term inappropriate, however, even more so because there exists perfectly suitable Arabic counterparts, such as, e.g., ‘Bilād al-Šām.’<sup>9</sup>

Several other well-known cases may be called forth; ‘Anatolia’, from Greek *anatolé* (‘rising’) derives from the same basic meaning as ‘Levant’ (from French ‘to rise’). ‘Syria’, formerly considered an old Greek derivative of ‘Assyria’ coined in the 1st millennium BCE, has recently been suggested to represent a more complex etymological case originating in the Eastern Mediterranean, dis-

seminated and altered in Luwian before eventually making its way into the Greek vocabulary of the day.<sup>10</sup> And save for the occasions where geographers would cite it as the name given to Bilād al-Šām prior to the rise of Islam, ‘Syria’ is not consistently employed in Arabic sources until invoked as a geographical framework for nationalist sentiments in the 19th century CE.<sup>11</sup>

Even ‘Mesopotamia’, despite its tautological simplicity, has been rightfully accused of contributing to a suspect and orientaling discourse.<sup>12</sup> And though we may consider these discursive flaws duly noted by contemporary scholarship, the implications rarely lead to significant alteration of traditional usage.<sup>13</sup> In proposing a critical reassessment of the ontic and heuristic value of ‘Mesopotamia’ as a spatial and historical unit, let us here turn to a review of the name and its meanings.

### 3 The origins of Mesopotamia

#### 3.1 Akkadian and Aramaic forerunners and Arrian’s *Anabasis Alexandrii*

‘Mesopotamia’, today the common name applied to all of the land between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in pre-Islamic times, is a Greek compound noun derived from the combination of *mésos-* (‘middle’, ‘in between’) and *-potamós* (‘stream’, ‘river’). The first known use of the term as a regional signifier is commonly attributed to Arrian (c. 85–150 CE), a Roman historian and official in the province of Cappadocia, who writes of “[...] [the] Euphrates and Tigris, which enclose Assyria between them – hence the name Mesopotamia [...]”.<sup>14</sup> Explicitly drawing on sources contemporary with the 4th century BCE campaigns of Alexander the Great, the phrase appears in relation to the Hellenist conquest of the Achaemenid Empire, describing the land eastward from the Euphrates Bend. It is worth stipulating that the term ‘Mesopotamia’, as a proper noun, does not occur in earlier Greek sources. For example, it is employed neither in the *Histories* of Herodotus (c. 485–425 BCE), nor in the *Anabasis* of Xenophon (c. 430–355 BCE).

5 Harley 1989; consider also Withers 2009.

6 Said 1978.

7 Scheffler 2003; Capdepuy 2008b; Capdepuy 2008a.

8 E.g. Potts 2012.

9 Walmsley 2007, 9.

10 Rollinger 2006 with references.

11 Shehadeh 2011, 24–26.

12 Bahrani 1998.

13 E.g., Mieroop 1999; Matthews 2003.

14 *Anabasis of Alexander* VII 7 (Brunt 1976); cf. Nissen and Oelsner 1996; Röllig 1997.

The existence of Hebrew and Aramaic predecessors of a meaning semantically similar to ‘Mesopotamia’ has been known for a long time, in particular its association with the ‘Aram Naharayim’ (‘Aram of the two Rivers’) of the Hebrew Bible. This latter term is closely associated with Egyptian ‘Naharin’ (*nbrn*), employed in the Amarna letters of the 14th century BCE in reference to the polity now more commonly known by its Hurrian name, Mitanni.<sup>15</sup> Geographically, both entities were located around or east of the Euphrates Bend, reaching as far as the Khabūr Basin.

A more recent addition to this etymology is the proposal to see in the Aramaic and Egyptian examples the echo of an even earlier Akkadian toponym, the *māt birītim* (‘land in between’) of early 2nd millennium BCE cuneiform sources. Both variants designate a geographical entity associated with the banks of the Euphrates Bend reaching as far eastwards as the Khabūr River, further accentuated by the notion that *māt birītim* may be understood more literally as the ‘land of the bend’.<sup>16</sup> Etymologically, this all serve to support an understanding of Greek ‘Mesopotamia’ as an adoption of a much earlier indigenous regional signifier, a point of origin which would explain the absence of it in Greek sources predating the campaigns of Alexander the Great. And though spatial or geographical outlines are rarely clear-cut in ancient sources, the concept appears securely attributable to the land between the Euphrates Bend and the drainage of the Khabūr River.

Herodotus makes no mention of Mesopotamia in his account on the structure of the Achaemenid Empire, yet we should linger for a moment over the Persian district of Eber-Nāri (‘across the river’), Aramaic Abar Naharā, which appears also in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions as *ebir nāri*,<sup>17</sup> all references to the lands west of the Euphrates Bend. During the reign of Cyrus the Great, Eber-Nāri was joined with Babylonia to create a satrapy spanning coastal and inner Syria, the dry-farming plains and the alluvial steppe of the Tigris and the Euphrates.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.2 Mesopotamia in Roman geographies: Diodorus, Strabo, and Pliny the Elder

Returning to Classical authors, we have already touched on the use of ‘Mesopotamia’ as a regional signifier in Arrian’s account on the campaigns of Alexander the Great. ‘Mesopotamia’ appears again in the division of Alexander’s empire following the Wars of the Diadochi towards the end of the 4th century BCE. In his account on the division of satrapies among Alexander’s successors, the Roman historian Diodorus Siculus (1st century BCE) names Mesopotamia a province alongside Arbelitis, the later Arsacid Adiabene of Assyria, both separate from Babylonia to the south.<sup>19</sup>

The Romans employed ‘Mesopotamia’ as a name for a province above Osroene, located along the right bank of the Tigris from Amuda to just northwest of Mosul, and the focus of prolonged imperial interest.<sup>20</sup> Yet at the same time, the term apparently maintained a more general use as a catch-all for both provinces as far as the Roman frontier east of Jabal Sinjār.<sup>21</sup> To Arrian, ‘Mesopotamia’ is conceptually juxtaposed with ‘Syria’, the two being referred to as “hollow Syria” and either “Mesopotamia” or “between the rivers”<sup>22</sup>. A similar regional ordering appears in the more extensive writings of Strabo (c. 65 BCE – 25 CE).<sup>23</sup> The *De Chorographia* of Pomponius Mela (1st century CE) sees Mesopotamia as located beyond Syria towards the east, bordering Adiabene (Assyria) and Babylonia. The *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE), a younger contemporary of Strabo, contains a more mixed concept of ‘Mesopotamia’, often considered interchangeably with ‘Babylonia’ in an interregional perspective.<sup>24</sup> This latter author is often credited as the original point of reference for present-day usage of ‘Mesopotamia’ as a regional signifier, thus for example Röllig,<sup>25</sup> who concludes that the regional ordering provided by Pliny and others essentially marks the origin of ‘Mesopotamia’ in its modern usage, where it encompasses all land between the rivers until the head of the Ṣaṭṭ al-‘Arab.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, however, Pliny’s account of the Roman border province of Mesopotamia

15 O’Callaghan 1948, 131–148.

16 Finkelstein 1962, 78–83.

17 Finkelstein 1962; Dandamayev 1996.

18 Stolper 1989.

19 Diodorus of Sicily, *Bibliotheca Historica* XVIII 3,3 (Oldfather 1933–1967).

20 Millar 1993, 100–102.

21 Dillemann 1962, 106–107.

22 *Anabasis of Alexander* III 11,4 & V 25,5 (Brunt 1976); but consider

Bosworth 1980, 292–293.

23 Strabon, *Geography* XVI 1,21 with comments (Radt 2002–2009).

24 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* (Rackham 1942).

25 Röllig 1997.

26 For explicitly similar views, see for example Hrouda 1997, 7; Pollock 1999, 1; Matthews 2003, 5–6; B. R. Foster and K. P. Foster 2009, 6; Frahm 2013, 19.

is rather clearly located between the Euphrates Bend and the Khabūr River, while his description of Babylonia further muddles the picture.<sup>27</sup>

### 3.3 Beyond Rome: Mesopotamia in the European and Islamic Middle Ages

It is commonly recognized that geographers of the Muslim caliphates drew on the works of their Greek and Roman predecessors, but they incorporated also Iranian, and even Akkadian, source material.<sup>28</sup> Arab geographies employed a regional divide between ‘al-Jazīrah’ (‘the island’) and ‘al-‘Irāq’ (‘the cliff’) largely corresponding to Classical ‘Mesopotamia’ and ‘Babylonia.’<sup>29</sup> As a province, al-Jazīrah is separated from Bilād al-Šām by the Euphrates River, though this may in part be a result of the continuance of former Roman administrative districts.<sup>30</sup>

In Europe, on the other hand, the Middle Ages saw a gradual confusion of regional concepts of the Middle East. Yet Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636 CE), a Spanish bishop and polymath whose writings were known and copied well into the Renaissance, wrote of Mesopotamia in much the same way as Strabo or Arrian.<sup>31</sup> Early Western maps relied on the same pool of sources. In the Hereford Map (Fig. 1), dating to 1285 CE, we find Mesopotamia, Babylonia, and Assyria depicted with explicit reference to the works of Isidore and others.<sup>32</sup> An earlier example of these divisions can be found in the Tabula Peutingeriana, a map of Roman itineraries likely to have originated in the 4th century, though preserved only in a copy from the late Middle Ages.<sup>33</sup>

In all, European cartographers of the 15th and 16th centuries derived most of their information from Roman geographers and historians, and demonstrated a marked dogmatism in their depiction of the region that was to remain largely unchanged until the beginning of the 19th century. But we also find a gradual implementation of spatial taxonomies founded on Arab sources, namely the differentiation of ‘al-Jazīrah’ and ‘al-‘Irāq.’<sup>34</sup>

One of the foremost mapmakers of the Enlightenment, the French geographer and cartographer Jean d’Anville (1697–1782), employed these terms, rather than those of Strabo or Ptolemy in his maps of the Middle East.<sup>35</sup>

The same perspective is adopted in the *Encyclopédie* of Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, where the lemma ‘Mesopotamia’ gives the Arab name for the region as ‘Al-Gézirah.’ The alluvial plain appears under the lemma ‘Irac,’ referred to as ‘Irac-Arabi’ or ‘Iraque-babilonienne.’<sup>36</sup> In England, the *General Gazeeteer* of Richard Brookes, published in numerous editions from 1762 until the beginning of the 19th century, considered ‘Mesopotamia’ another name for the Ottoman *elayet* of Diyarbakir, and linked ‘Babylonia’ or ‘Chaldea’ to ‘Iric Arabi’ (sic).<sup>37</sup> The first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* gave the same account.<sup>38</sup> Many European travelers employed ‘Mesopotamia’ in a different sense, however, for example the traveler Carsten Niebuhr (1733–1815), who wrote of Assyria and Mesopotamia, the latter clearly conceived of as located around Baghdad.<sup>39</sup> Though obviously a corrupt tradition, some British universal geographies of the late 18th century considered ‘Mesopotamia’ interchangeable with the *elayet* of Diyarbakir, and said that it stretched from the Taurus to the shores of the Persian Gulf.<sup>40</sup>

## 4 Into the Modern Age: geographies of empire

If these examples offer little in the way of an unequivocal meaning of ‘Mesopotamia’ throughout the history of post-Medieval Europe, one thing that does seem clear is that ‘Mesopotamia’ appears to have been used only occasionally in European writings prior to the beginning of the 19th century. Francis Rawdon Chesney (1789–1872), British officer and head of the Euphrates Expedition 1835–1837, was one of the first to offer and put to use a formalizing outline of ‘Mesopotamia’ as a geo-

27 Contrast *Natural History* V 86–87 to VI 117 & 121.

28 Silverstein 2010, 274–279.

29 Cf. Kennedy 2002, Map 20–21; Le Strange 1905, 25–25; Miller 1986.

30 Le Strange 1890, 25–27.

31 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies* XIV 3.3 (Barney et al. 2006).

32 Westrem 2002.

33 Talbert 2010, 122–123; also Miller 1962, 2.

34 On which, see especially Miller 1986.

35 See also Tibbetts 1978, 29–30.

36 Jaucourt 1765b, Jaucourt 1765a.

37 Brookes 1762.

38 Smellie 1768.

39 Niebuhr 1774–1778.

40 E.g., Bankes 1790, 164–165.

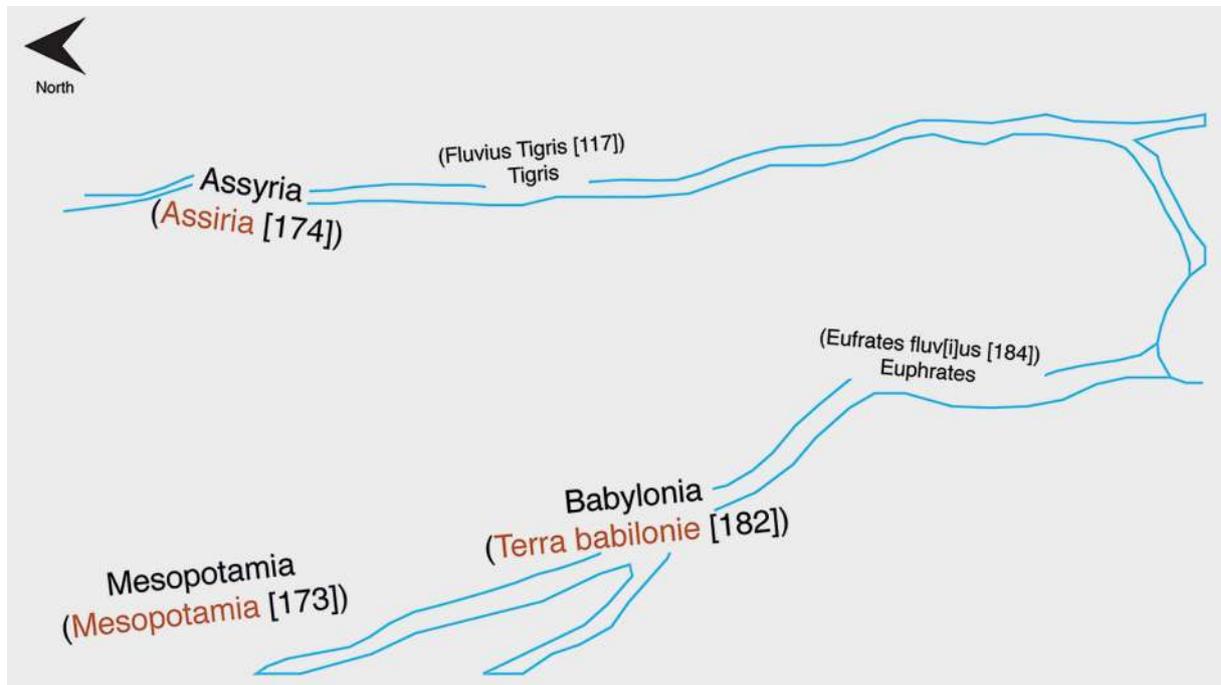


Fig. 1 Line drawing after detail of the Hereford Map (ca. 1285) with relative location of Babylonia, Assyria, and Mesopotamia shown (adapted from Westrem 2002, with index numbers in brackets).

graphically delineable entity, and notes in passing that:

Contrary to the description given by some of the ancient geographers, as well as the strict meaning of the expressive term *Aram-naharaim*, Mesopotamia has been supposed to have its southern extremity at the Median Wall, instead of approaching the shores of the Persian Gulf.<sup>41</sup>

Chesney's perception of Mesopotamia was not unique. The same definition appears, albeit haphazardly, in various writings around this time, especially in the proceedings of the Royal Geographic Society, but is also observable in intellectual circles in France, Germany, and the US. Still, more than a decade later, with the first archaeological discoveries at Nineveh and Nimrud having already come to the attention of the general public of Western Europe, George Rawlinson (1812–1902), Camden Professor of Ancient History at Oxford and brother of Sir Henry Creswick Rawlinson, maintained and stipulated the use of 'Mesopotamia' as a name for the land

between Baghdad and the Taurus in his widely used textbook *A Manual of Ancient History*:

The name of Mesopotamia was applied by the Parthians, not to the whole region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, but only to the upper portion of it – the tract bounded on the north by the Mons Masius [the Tur Abdin], and on the south by a canal uniting the two streams a little above the 33rd parallel.<sup>42</sup>

In Europe and North America, the first commonly disseminated atlases, which appeared in increasing numbers throughout the latter half of the 19th century, largely followed the divisions adhered to also in earlier European cartography. The most common way of designating the Euphrates and Tigris drainages relied on Arabic spatial taxonomies already found in Western maps during the Enlightenment, thus employing 'al-Jazīrah' or 'Mesopotamia' as a name for the land above Baghdad, and 'Irāq al-ʿArabi' or 'Chaldea,' or 'Babylonia,' for the alluvial plain south towards the Persian Gulf. The

41 Chesney 1850, 103.

42 Rawlinson 1869, 550.



Fig. 2 Detail from Stanford's London Atlas of Universal Geography (Stanford 1901, Pl. 58), with Jazirah or Mesopotamia (grey oblique, upper left) and Irak Arabi or Babylonia (grey oblique, lower right).

most illustrative example comes from the British Stanford's London Atlas of Universal Geography<sup>43</sup> (Fig. 2) where 'Jezireh' is explicitly equated with 'Mesopotamia,' and 'Irak Arabi' with 'Babylonia,' but the same pattern appears to underpin other major contemporary Western atlases.<sup>44</sup>

Turning to another popular and easily accessible source of information, let us consider the penultimate edition of Baedeker's *Palestine and Syria* (1906). Written by John Punnett Peters (1852–1921), director of the University of Philadelphia's excavations at Nippur from 1888–1895, the relevant section of the guidebook described the Ottoman possessions in the Tigris-Euphrates drainage in this way:

Neither geography nor history offers any general name for the district watered by the *Euphrates* (Arabic *el-Frât*) and the *Tigris* (Arabic *ed-Diljeh*), which is bounded on the N. by the Armenian Taurus, on the E. by the Iranian frontier mountains, on the S.E. by the Persian Gulf, and on the S. and E. by the Syrian Desert and the Syrian Mountains. Traditional usage applies the name of *Mesopotamia* (land between the streams, Arabic *el-Jezireh*, i.e., the island) to the upper or N.W. portion of the district, roughly extending to a line drawn from Deli 'Abbas to Kal 'at Fellûja, while the lower or S.E. portion is known as *Babylonia* (Arabic 'Irâk 'Arabi).<sup>45</sup>

43 Stanford 1901, Pl. 58.

44 E.g., Stieler's *Hand-Atlas* in Germany, which also appeared in French, Italian, and Spanish versions, Colton's *General Atlas* in the US, and Migeons

*Nouvelle Atlas Illustré Géographie Universelle* in France.

45 Baedeker 1906, 391–392.

If these examples may be said to concern very generalizing Western perceptions of geographical spaces in the Ottoman Empire of the late 19th century, then specialized literature further enforces the notion of ‘Mesopotamia’ as a spatial entity different from what we might think of today. Rather esteemed popular works on the histories of Assyria and Babylonia published prior to the First World War still conceived of and transmitted the meaning of Mesopotamia to their readers in this former sense. In juxtaposition with spatial taxonomies observable in repositories of common knowledge, this hints at a very blurred divide between notions of the past and present spheres of the region.

Hugo Winckler (1863–1913), discoverer of the Hittite capital of Boghazköy and lecturer at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität (the later Humboldt University) of Berlin, made consistent and ample use of ‘Mesopotamia’ in reference to the region west of Assyria, with some concordance to Egyptian *nbrn*.<sup>46</sup> L. W. King (1869–1919), Assyriologist and Assistant Keeper of the British Museum, talked of it as the name of the region west of Assyria “[...] known to the Greeks as Mesopotamia [...]” in his *A History of Sumer and Akkad*.<sup>47</sup> Even after the First World War, when the sequel *A History of Babylonia* appeared and the author remarked on the presence of British troops in South Mesopotamia, the adjoining map still located Mesopotamia securely in the western Jazīrah.<sup>48</sup>

This brief survey serves to illustrate that quite an extensive array of general histories, textbooks, and atlases of the Western world did not stray very far from Arrian’s perception of ‘Mesopotamia’ throughout the 19th and early 20th century CE. And yet, at the same time, Chesney’s ‘Mesopotamia’, the ‘Mesopotamia’ that stretched from the Taurus to the Persian Gulf, remained at large, albeit much less common, and used much more haphazardly than what was to be the case after the First World War. As an amusing and rather curious illustration of this contradictory state of affairs, let us, before turning to consider British geographies during the war, conclude this section by lingering for a moment over the last English edition of Baedeker’s *Palestine and Syria* (1912), and what John Punnett Peters now, six years on, thought Me-

sopotamia to be (compare the quote below with the entry from the 1906 edition cited above):

The district watered by the Euphrates (Arabic El-Frât) and the Tigris (Arabic Shaṭṭ; also called Ed-Dijleh in its lower course), which is bounded on the N. by the Armenian Taurus, on the E. by the Iranian frontier mountains on the S.E. by the Persian Gulf, and on the S. and W. by the Syrian Steppe, is known to geographers as Mesopotamia. The inhabitants apply the name of El-Jezîreh (i.e. the island) to the upper or N.W. portion of the district, roughly extending to a line drawn from Deli ‘Abbâs to Fellûja, while the lower of S.E. portion (the ancient Babylonia) is known as ‘Irâk ‘Arabi.<sup>49</sup>

## 5 Re-configuring Mesopotamia: British geographies of the First World War

Several different terms were used in the West in reference to the Euphrates and Tigris drainage prior to the First World War, in relation to the Ottoman Empire for example ‘Turkish Arabia’, ‘Turkish ‘Iraq’, or ‘Turquie d’Asie’ but also ‘Mesopotamia’, ‘Babylonia’, or ‘Chaldea’. The British imperial administration formally referred to the area as part of Turkish Arabia up till the outbreak of the First World War in 1914:

The ancient name ‘Iraq – of which the etymology, or at least the meaning in the present case, is doubtful – is used by the Ottoman Government to denote the country of the lower Euphrates and Tigris – the richest and most valuable of the whole basin of the Persian Gulf – which is comprised in the Turkish Wilayats or provinces of Baghdad and Basrah. In British official terminology Turkish ‘Iraq, with the addition of the more northern Wilayat of Musal (...), is conventionally known as “Turkish Arabia”; but the expression is an unfortunate one, for it obviously suggests the Red Sea provinces

<sup>46</sup> E.g., Winckler 1907, 172.

<sup>47</sup> King 1910, 7.

<sup>48</sup> King 1919, v & 1–13 as opposed to Map XVIII.

<sup>49</sup> Baedeker 1912, 413.

of Yaman and Hijaz rather than Mesopotamia which is no part, either physically or politically, of the Arabian peninsula.<sup>50</sup>

As will be clear from this quotation, ‘Mesopotamia’ was not a strange term to British administrators. Yet it was only at the outbreak of the First World War that British armed forces and civil services formally and unequivocally adopted ‘Mesopotamia’ as the name for a region, which had, up till that point, been called by a number of different names. Through the coining of the ‘Mesopotamian Campaign’ British authorities enforced and spread a particular use of ‘Mesopotamia’ derived from contemporary usage among some but as demonstrated above, far from all Western specialists with an interest in the region. One best-selling contemporary example of what ‘Mesopotamia’ came to encompass, is given by the British archaeologist D. G. Hogarth (1862–1927), who in the first edition of his *The Ancient East*, published in September 1914, noted:

No common name has ever included all its parts, both the interfluvial region and the districts beyond the Tigris; but since the term *Mesopotamia*, though obviously incorrect, is generally understood nowadays to designate it, this name may be used for want of a better.<sup>51</sup>

Apart from his association with the Arab Bureau in Cairo during the First World War, Hogarth also served in the Geographical Section of the Naval Intelligence Division, where he contributed extensively to the first series of admiralty handbooks.<sup>52</sup> Though arguably drawing also on definitions reiterated by others, especially Chesney, whose maps were still used by British authorities at the outbreak of the war, the description of Mesopotamia given in the first edition of the handbooks tallies neatly with Hogarth’s own:

This handbook deals principally with the area comprised within the following boundaries: to the S. the Persian Gulf; SE., E., and NE. the

chains of mountains that are the rim of the great plateau of Irān or Persia; to the N. the similar ranges which form the edges of the table-lands of Armenia and Asia Minor; to the W. the Syrian desert, and to the SW. the desert of Northern Arabia.<sup>53</sup>

If the *Handbook of Mesopotamia* – and the regional taxonomy to which it adhered – served to disseminate a particular perception of ‘Mesopotamia’ as a very real regional entity among Allied military personnel and British decision-makers during the war, then contemporary political events brought it to a more lasting material crystallization. Stepping back for a moment, we need here to consider British interest in the region in a wider perspective.

Administratively and geo-politically, Turkish Arabia was of little significance to British foreign policy prior to 1914, beyond affairs concerned with the management of India.<sup>54</sup> With respect to Indian colonial policy, Ottoman possessions in the Tigris-Euphrates drainage mattered mainly in relation to imperial strategies aimed at curbing Russian influence in Persia and Central Asia. Within this wider geo-political framework, affairs in Turkish Arabia were, when viewed in isolation, of remote concern to British decision-makers.

Archaeological and historical interest in the region, spurred by the discoveries of Layard, Botta and others half a century earlier,<sup>55</sup> had done little to change this state of affairs on a political level. Ottoman administrative control of the region, which had been left largely in the hands of local power structures for the better part of the 19th century, only became more permanently fixed from the 1870ies onwards.<sup>56</sup> To the British Empire, the chief concern in the region – if it was ever considered a region as such – were the ports in the southernmost *vilayet* of Başrah and their ability to support the Royal Navy.

This explains in large part why military engagements in and around the Persian Gulf during the First World War were more or less exclusively the responsibility of the Indian Office. Initial objectives for the

50 Lorimer 1908, II, 759–761.

51 Hogarth 1914, 20.

52 Richter 2008, 222–223.

53 Naval Intelligence Division 1916, 9.

54 Parry 2013, 145–146.

55 Larsen 1996.

56 Yapp 1987, 137–145.



Fig. 3 The map accompanying the Sykes-Picot Agreement, signed 8 May 1916. British areas of direct (in pink) and indirect (B), and corresponding French areas of direct (in blue) and indirect (A) control.

theatre of operations that came to be known as the 'Mesopotamian Campaign,' focused squarely on protecting oil fields in Persia and associated processing and shipping facilities on the Persian Gulf. Land operations were conceived of mainly as tactical undertakings in support of these objectives, and did therefore not extend beyond the northern part of the alluvium.<sup>57</sup> The atrocities suffered by elements of the British Indian Army during the Siege of Kūt in April 1916 aptly illustrate the logisti-

cal constraints faced by British commanders in the region when venturing too far beyond their supply bases at Baṣrah.

Renewed British interest in the region in the autumn of 1916 and a concurrent depletion of Ottoman forces brought about a decisive change in military strength and tactical initiative. In March 1917, the British Indian Army took Baghdad. Yet little advance further north was made – or indeed attempted – until the last months of

<sup>57</sup> Sluglett 2007, 8–12.

the war, in 1918, when objectives shifted towards conquering as much Ottoman territory as possible before the cessation of hostilities. When an armistice with the Ottoman Empire was signed at Mudros in October 1918, British forces were still on the move north along the Middle Tigris, entering Mosul on 14 November.

The eventual lines established had less to do with any conscious imperial policy than with a few, eager commanders on the ground. Though often claimed the birth certificate of the modern states of Iraq and Syria, the map that accompanied the infamous Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 illustrates rather clearly that principal British territorial interests lingered still on the shores of the Persian Gulf and the Tigris-Euphrates delta (Fig. 3). Prospecting of the huge oilfields around Kirkuk was undertaken in the early 1920ies, with commercial exploitation eventually starting in 1925. But at the 1919 negotiations at Versailles, the oil played only a peripheral, and often ambiguous, role.<sup>58</sup>

## 6 The Mandate of Mesopotamia and the Kingdom of Iraq

M. E. Yapp has succinctly noted that the formation of the modern state of Iraq came about as the result of a series of ‘logical accidents’ in the years immediately after the First World War. While there was no initial intention (in fact, rather the opposite) to merge the former Ottoman *vilayets* of Basrah, Baghdad, and Mosul into one state, events on the global stage altered a set of otherwise conflicting agendas to form the basis for a British mandate that eventually developed into an independent political territory.<sup>59</sup> Even the name ‘Iraq’ was a later addition. The initial British draft for the mandate awarded by the League of Nations at the San Remo conference in April 1920 named the nascent state ‘Mesopotamia.’<sup>60</sup> Less than a year later, the situation had changed radically following the Iraqi Revolt in the autumn of 1920, and the proposed mandate was turned into the semi-independent Kingdom of Iraq. While maintaining the same geographical outline as the proposed mandate, relations with the British Empire were largely refurbished and stabilized in the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1922.

## 7 Consolidating past gains: Mesopotamia of the Mesopotamian campaign

If ‘Mesopotamia’ had all but disappeared from the scene of contemporary politics by 1925, it retained its usage as a Classical term, employed by historical specialists as well as in more general surveys on the history of the newborn state of Iraq. That recent political events had not failed to infuse the term with new meaning is evident enough, however, here for example in an interwar account on the history of the state of Iraq by historian Henry Albert Foster (1874–1944):

While Mesopotamia has not always applied to the same area it has always applied to some portion of the country traversed by the Tigris-Euphrates river system and lying between the mountains of Kurdistan and the Persian Gulf. For the most part Mesopotamia formerly referred to that part of the valley north of old Babylonia.<sup>61</sup>

Army engineer and geographer Kenneth Mason (1887–1976), who authored the Second World War edition of the admiralty handbook on Mesopotamia, now entitled *Iraq and the Persian Gulf*,<sup>62</sup> was also aware of these semantic alterations when he described the names applied to the region historically:

Mesopotamia in early classical times meant the whole region of the two rivers from the foothills of the Turkish Taurus to the Persian Gulf; later it was confined to the region north of the delta lands – the Jazira of the Moslem period – and Babylonia was used for the delta lands. [...] In very recent times, and for the first twenty years of the present century, it was the commonest term in western Europe for the country as a whole in its earliest classical sense.<sup>63</sup>

The same gradual metamorphosis arises from encyclopedic works. Where articles on ‘Mesopotamia’ from the late 18th and early 19th century CE considered it

58 Helmreich 1974, 207–213.

59 Yapp 1987, 331–336.

60 Foreign Office 1921.

61 H. A. Foster 1936, 2.

62 Clout and Gosme 2003, 160–161.

63 Naval Intelligence Division 1944, 4–5.

to have only one meaning, the widely popular 1911-edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* recognized both the Classical and the extended understandings of the word, though focusing on the former.<sup>64</sup> Jumping forward a hundred years, the opposite case prevails.<sup>65</sup> Further, the origin of ‘Mesopotamia’ as referring to all of the land between the Euphrates and the Tigris, from the Anatolian Plateau to the Šaṭṭ al-‘Arab, is nowadays often credited to Pliny the Elder.<sup>66</sup>

## 8 Statistical correlates: contributions from bibliometrics

I have argued that ‘Mesopotamia’ retained the spatial properties originally assigned to it by Greek authors for a period of more than two millennia, and further that a transformation of these spatial properties took place gradually through the late 19th and early 20th century CE. This has been discussed through a review of several different types of source material, namely individual and encyclopedic works, maps, and specialist literature. To apply a different, and more easily quantifiable perspective, the various trajectories of usage for the last 200 years described above can be visualized through openly available search algorithms, here namely the *Google Ngram Viewer*.<sup>67</sup> The *Ngram Viewer* can provide an overview of the frequency of words and word clusters in written works amassed from Google Books in 2008. This comprises a dataset derived from 5.2 billion books with a total word count of an approximate 500 billion words, primarily in English, but also with substantial samples in French, German, Spanish, Russian and Chinese. Rough estimates suggest that the number of works covered by Google Ngram amount to 6% of all books ever published.<sup>68</sup>

For our current purposes, let us consider the relative frequency of the lemma ‘Babylonia’, ‘Assyria’, and ‘Mesopotamia’ across the period 1800–2008 CE, as derived from English, French, and German works. The three resulting graphs provide for two interesting spikes in the frequency of these three regional names, first in English sources (Fig. 4), which we will consider at length before

turning to corresponding queries in French and German (Figs. 5, 6).

The marked increase in frequency of all three lemma observable between 1840 and 1860 can be readily attributed to the public impact in Western society of the discoveries of the Neo-Assyrian capital cities during this period, not to mention the concurrent decipherment of the cuneiform script.<sup>69</sup> Assuming that this offers some assurance as to the general validity of the sample, the second spike, between 1910 and 1920, becomes rather more interesting. Here we see a clear increase in usage frequency of ‘Mesopotamia’ coincident with a corresponding drop in the use of ‘Babylonia’ and ‘Assyria’. While the graph for ‘Mesopotamia’ drops sharply just after 1920, it maintains a frequency level well above that of ‘Assyria’ and ‘Babylonia’ throughout the remainder of the 20th century, in marked contrast to the situation before the First World War.

The variation in frequency found in corresponding searches in French and German is less pronounced, but seems to follow the same pattern, especially with respect to the period coinciding with the First World War.

Apart from demonstrating a notable change in the use of regional signifiers during the First World War, these graphs demonstrate another equally important shift. Whereas we see no clear or prolonged preference in usage during the 19th century, the period after the First World War clearly indicates a relative and stable preference for ‘Mesopotamia’ as opposed to ‘Assyria’ and ‘Babylonia’. In statistical terms, the latter situation implies the presence of a taxonomical hierarchy, in which the values of all three terms are interrelated. This close agreement is not present prior to 1914.

## 9 Mesopotamia and Mesopotamians: inventing and dismantling a historical region

To briefly summarize the conclusions made so far, I have suggested that ‘Mesopotamia’ maintained the spatial properties outlined by Arrian and derived from authors contemporary with Alexander the Great, for some

64 Hogg 1911.

65 Edzard, Frye, and von Soden 2014.

66 E.g., Nissen and Oelsner 1996; Röllig 1997.

67 *Google Books Ngram Viewer* <https://books.google.com/ngrams>, accessed 18

December 2015.

68 Michel et al. 2011; Lin et al. 2012.

69 Larsen 1996; Adkins 2003.

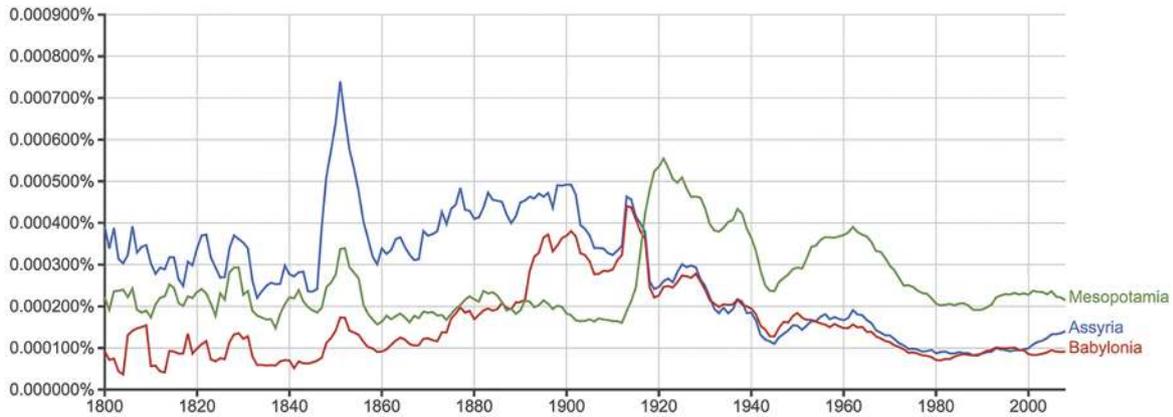


Fig. 4 Google Ngram frequencies of Assyria (blue), Babylonia (red), and Mesopotamia (green) in English works from 1800 to 2008.



Fig. 5 Google Ngram frequencies of Assyrie (blue), Babylonic (red), and Mésopotamie (green) in French works from 1800 to 2008.

two millennia or more, until around the beginning of the 19th century CE.

I do not claim any particular or intimate understanding of what exact geographical area Pliny and his contemporaries may have had in mind when redefining the meaning of ‘Mesopotamia,’ if indeed they ever did. What emerges from the historical survey presented here is, more importantly, that subsequent European scholarship, of The Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and The Enlightenment, thought and wrote of Mesopotamia very much in the same way as Arrian had done. Thus, even if Pliny is to be credited with the coining of Mesopotamia along the lines with which we associate it today, the fair majority of Western geographers, for all practical purposes, apparently saw fit to ignore his conclusions on the matter for some 1500 years.

Until the first half of the 19th century CE, ‘Mesopotamia’ signified a region spanning the steppe be-

tween the Euphrates Bend in central Syria and the western fringes of the Assyrian heartland around the Middle Tigris. The eventual transformation of these properties, through the association of the signifier ‘Mesopotamia’ with all of the land between the Euphrates and the Tigris, from the Taurus Mountains to the Persian Gulf, came about only gradually, through the novel association of this signifier with a distinct geo-political, yet neither culturally, nor environmentally coherent space. Where Arrian had in mind a fairly well-defined environmental region spanning the plains between the Euphrates Bend and the Assyrian heartland, Chesney’s ‘Mesopotamia’ makes little immediate sense unless placed on a map. The latter incorporates multiple and rather different eco-zones, not to mention cultural regions that Classic and Arab geographers alike preferred to keep separate.



Fig. 6 Google Ngram frequencies of Assyrien (blue), Babylonien (red), and Mesopotamien (green) in German works from 1800 to 2008.

Both meanings were in play throughout the latter half of the 19th century. But what is nowadays more or less entirely overlooked is that the Mesopotamia into which Alexander had ventured before moving on to Assyria and Babylonia was still very much a part of the geographical vocabulary of the West even on the eve of the First World War.

The semantic metamorphosis that Mesopotamia underwent following 1914 critically altered this situation, by rendering ‘Mesopotamia’ a purely geographical concept (the straightforward deixis of ‘the land between the rivers’) and coincidentally doing away with the environmental and cultural coherency embedded in the distinction between the Assyria, Babylonia, and Mesopotamia of Greek and Roman geographies, or the Jazīrah and ‘Irāq of Medieval Arab scholarship.

Purged of its historical payload, ‘Mesopotamia’ rose to prominence as the name for a geo-political space during the Great War, a space that eventually became the modern state of Iraq. Left then as a spatial signifier without a space to signify, ‘Mesopotamia’ reverted, once again, to a historical region, yet referring to a modern geographical space hammered out during a decade of intense British activity in the region. Bluntly stated, ‘Mesopotamia’ retained the respectable age-old adornments of the Classical authors, yet signifying a geographical space that was largely a product of very recent British imperial discourse, politics, and military prowess.

This inherent dichotomy became gradually institutionalized among historians and archaeologists in the in-

terwar years, and especially after the Second World War. An example of its crystallization can be readily appreciated in the following excerpt from *Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, written by one of the foremost Assyriologists of the postwar era, namely A. Leo Oppenheim (1904–1974):

It is customary to designate the two principal local formulations through which Mesopotamian civilization speaks to us by the political terms Babylonia and Assyria.<sup>70</sup>

As a basic semantic carrier, ‘Mesopotamia’ occupies here the dual roles of civilizational and geographical framework, to which we subordinate the more ethnically fused localities of ‘Babylonia’ and ‘Assyria.’ Released from its formerly inherent cultural or environmental particularities, ‘Mesopotamia’ has come to embody a spatial (and temporal) abstraction of more localized historical subregions. In this light, it is certainly ironic that critical discussions of Assyria and Babylonia have since then drawn attention to the temporal and cultural specificity implicit to their ethnonymic character.<sup>71</sup> ‘Mesopotamia,’ in contrast, is rarely subjected to the same level of conceptual criticism, as it no longer holds inherent qualities beyond those of a simple geographical delineation. And this is despite the fact that Winckler employed ‘Mesopotamia’ as a cultural region on a par with ‘Assyria’ and ‘Babylonia’ as late as 1907.

The taxonomical hierarchy established in Oppen-

70 Oppenheim 1964, 37.

71 E.g., von Dassow 1999, 234–245.

heim's outline recurs, I would argue, in the bibliometric trajectories presented above, namely through the stable agreement with and relative subordination to 'Mesopotamia' seen in the use of 'Assyria' and 'Babylonia' in Western sources from the interwar years and until the present day. It further reflects the general ease with which generations of historians and archaeologists wrote and researched on 'Mesopotamians' and 'Mesopotamianism', a civilizational framework that, albeit cautiously, still finds regular mention today also.<sup>72</sup>

It will far exceed the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive discussion of whether or not a Mesopotamian civilization is indeed a valid ontic entity.<sup>73</sup> I will, however, draw attention to the suggestive powers of Mesopotamia as a regional signifier in enforcing a notion of cultural unity across the upland steppe of the Jazīrah and the alluvial plain of al-'Irāq, and suggest that this spatial framework should be approached with a rather healthy share of suspicion in light of the conceptual history reviewed above.

Though rarely explicit, appreciations of the cultural, social, and environmental differences between the Jazīrah and al-'Irāq in pre-Classical periods do appear also in traditional general histories. The preface to Postgate's *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History* (1994) offers one admirably clear perspective on the problems arising from perceiving of 'Mesopotamia' as a coherent cultural region:

This book however concentrates on the south because it is only during the second millennium that the available documentary sources allow us to say much about the north. Further, the society and economy of the north are palpably different, and since my effort has been to give a coherent account of these aspects it is not helpful to jump about and include the occasional reference to the north where it happens to appear relevant. My apologies, therefore, to Subartu [the Jazīrah, R. R.] for seeming to ignore it [...].<sup>74</sup>

At the time of writing, there was perhaps less of a solid empirical basis on which to build analyses of the history of the upland plains to which Postgate offered his apologies. The course of recent research, particularly among archaeologists, underscores the critical attention that should now be paid to differences between the Jazīrah and the alluvial plain of al-'Irāq.

## 10 A passing greatly exaggerated: Changing geographies, again

True to the semantic fluidity of regional markers discussed at the outset of this article, Mesopotamia remains a concept in a continuous state of change. Renewed attention towards regional characteristics of landscape and environment is one reason. Another is the altered agenda of foreign missions in the face of an ever-changing political landscape. Where archaeological work prior to the 1970ies was concentrated more or less exclusively in the arid Tigris-Euphrates alluvium and bordering regions, succeeding decades saw a flurry of archaeological projects moving into the Syrian Jazīrah, stimulated by a closing down of the state of Iraq to foreign missions and outstanding discoveries further north and west.<sup>75</sup>

The practical relevance of regional divisions sensitive towards environmental (and, one may argue, also social and cultural) differences across the undifferentiated culture-historical space of Oppenheim's Mesopotamia have then been embraced most openly in archaeology, where recent research have increasingly reinstated the regional spaces of Babylonia and Assyria, or the original version of Mesopotamia, yet going by different names.

Though al-Jazīrah is used regularly also in Western specialist writings, most researchers now talk readily of 'Upper' or 'Northern Mesopotamia' as opposed to 'Lower' or 'Southern Mesopotamia',<sup>76</sup> while some have developed similar binary meanings of wholly novel terms, e.g., the 'Northern Fertile Crescent'.<sup>77</sup> Doing away for a moment with names, and looking instead at the spaces that they signify, it should be fairly clear that these examples echo the pre-1914 binaries of 'Mesopotamia'

72 Yoffee 2004, 209–232.

73 For an interesting essay on this matter, see Koliński 2006. Consider also the thoughtful introduction in McMahon 2013, 462.

74 Postgate 1994, xxii.

75 Akkermans and Schwartz 2003.

76 E.g., Laneri, Pfälzner, and Valentini 2012; Menze and Ur 2012; Potts 2012; Nieuwenhuys, Bernbeck, and Akkermans 2013.

77 Riehl et al. 2013.

and ‘Babylonia’ or ‘al-Jazīrah’ and ‘al-‘Irāq (al-‘Arabī), again reaching back into Medieval geographies and ultimately the regional orders of Roman and Greek writers.

In other words, this emergent regional taxonomy closely replicates one whose passing, so I would assert, has been greatly exaggerated. And yet this taxonomy employs terms that are conceptually dubious courtesy of their link to a historical or cultural region – ‘Mesopotamia’ – that is itself very much a modern invention. What, one may ask, do ‘Upper Mesopotamia’ and ‘Lower Mesopotamia’ signify? Parts of a purported cultural or regional whole? Practical subdivisions of a mere general delineation of space? And do they do so with any more authority or historical weight than, say, ‘Mesopotamia’ and ‘Babylonia’ (as the Baedeker – in the 1906 version – would have it) or ‘al-Jazīrah’ and ‘al-‘Irāq’? One may argue that ‘Mesopotamia’, having grown into a geographical concept devoid of any cultural payload, is in fact better suited at delineating spaces of archaeological and historical research than such Medieval or Classical terms. And yet, the last century or so of Ancient Near Eastern research has demonstrated that it is very easy indeed to fill into an empty spatial frame a host of cultural, ideological, political, and economic traits not easily disentangled afterwards.

## II Conclusions

To conclude, ‘Mesopotamia’, far from being an easily traceable signifier for an easily demarcated geographical space, has been used to designate a number of different areas through history. From its Classical inception and until the 19th century CE, it was a commonly accepted name for the region between the Euphrates Bend and the Tigris drainage bordering Assyria on its east and Babylonia to the south. Yet a concurrent and gradual conceptual change initiated in relation to British imperialist aspirations in the 19th century supplanted the term to refer to all of the land between the Euphrates and the Tigris, from the Taurus to the Persian Gulf. The coming of the First World War, and the unequivocal adher-

ence to this latter meaning of Mesopotamia in British official terminology and general media effectively obliterated that of the former. As such, the ‘Mesopotamia’ of the 20th and 21st century is an ancient name signifying a modern space, constructed by a short-lived imperial discourse that eventually found other terms (e.g., ‘Iraq’) more feasible.

As the critical reader will have noticed, these observations are based in the main on British source material coming out of the imperial age of the 19th century and early 20th century CE. Setting aside the tangible geopolitical and historical reasons for this bias, we may ask if things would have been any different when viewed through the lens of French or German intellectual history? While I cannot claim to have perused individual works of the latter two nations with an intensity corresponding to that of the English-speaking world, the bibliometric perspective offered earlier demonstrates a relatively clear level of overall agreement. From an initial and rather muddled picture for the 19th century across all three datasets, the change observable from 1914 onwards is clear and unequivocal. Popular atlases from all three linguistic areas, as pointed out earlier, demonstrate similar parallels. Though I admit a focus on British sources (for obvious reasons), the implications of the conceptual changes seem generally applicable.

It has already been pointed out here that regions are, by definition, fluid concepts and prone to change, sometimes quite rapidly. As such it may seem a futile exercise to offer any formalizing suggestions as to usage or definition, especially for a concept as battered by time as the one brought to the fore in this study. And yet the present author for one finds that ‘Mesopotamia’, given the very modern origin of the geographical space that it signifies, poses significant conceptual problems for anything but the most generalizing views on Ancient Near Eastern history and archaeology. Though not bereft of problems, turning to Arabic geographical vocabularies, e.g., ‘al-Jazīrah’ and ‘al-‘Irāq’, will certainly leave Western researchers on firmer conceptual grounds, and do away with yet another orientalizing entity coined for another time, age, and purpose.

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