

ARTICLE

## “Bringing ‘The Magic Carpet Up to Date’: Imperial Airways in Iraq, 1920–1932”

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### Abstract

Scholars working on mandate Iraq have demonstrated the centrality of indiscriminate air power in the British Empire’s “policing” tactics, recognising an intimate link between the Royal Air Force and mandatory rule. Less clear, however, is how Iraq’s emergence as a node in interwar commercial aviation routes was also the product of British control. Foregrounding the activities of the British airline Imperial Airways (1924–1939) sheds light on the imperial roots of air tourism in Iraq. Using government records and the archives of Imperial Airways—alongside popular press books, magazines, newspapers, and ephemeral promotional material—this article draws attention to how Imperial Airways’ proponents talked about air travel in Iraq both as a boon for the British Empire and as a means of “developing” the mandated state itself. In this latter vein, promoters of “air-mindedness” emphasised Iraq’s antiquity for multiple ends. First, and perhaps most obvious, to make it more enticing for tourists. Second, they juxtaposed an image of Iraq as frozen in the past with aviation’s modernising potential. Ultimately, in foregrounding civic aviation, this article aims to contribute to the nascent historiography of tourism in Iraq alongside broader debates about transportation infrastructure, culture, and empire in the interwar period.

**Keywords:** League of Nations mandates; Imperial Airways; colonial development; Mesopotamia; archaeology

The March 1929 issue of the *Traveller’s Gazette*, a travel magazine published by the British tourism company Thomas Cook & Son, reported on the “Around-the-World” cruise of the S.S. *Franconia*, which had departed New York City on 15 January of that year. According to the *Gazette* writer, a detachment of *Franconia* passengers was the world’s “first [tourist group] to combine an air cruise with a sea cruise,” a tourist experience—in the words of one passenger—“not equalled in fascination and interest in the whole wide world of travel.” After arriving at port in Haifa, in British-controlled Palestine, the tour group travelled by rail for sightseeing in Jerusalem. From a nearby airstrip, they then flew a plane chartered from Imperial Airways, Britain’s interwar commercial airline, to Iraq: the “land of the Arabian Nights,” in the *Gazette*’s words. They stopped at Rutba Wells in western Iraq, resting at a hotel run by the Nairn Eastern Transport Company. From Rutba, the group continued to Baghdad. In flying over the “domes and minarets of Baghdad,” the *Gazette* boasted that tourists got to experience “the modern counterpart” to the Arabian Nights fantasy of a magic carpet ride. While in Iraq they visited Babylon and other ruined cities, including Kish, where they had the “enviable experience” of watching artefacts

“being rescued from the darkness of centuries to the sunshine of to-day.” Passengers then departed by aeroplane for Cairo before taking a train to rejoin the *Franconia* in the town of Suez. The *Gazette* lauded this synthesis of modern transit and quasi-historical fantasy in the piece’s title: “The Magic Carpet Up to Date.”<sup>1</sup>

This tourist itinerary reveals how, like other case studies discussed in this special issue, empire lay at the heart of transportation infrastructure and leisure travel in the region. In the aftermath of World War I and the establishment of the League of Nations, Britain divided up and seized control of territories formerly belonging to the Ottoman Empire, including the newly established British mandated territories of Palestine and Iraq. The Royal Air Force (RAF) had operated air bases in these territories during and after the war, using aerial surveillance and bombardment to rule by force. Later, Imperial Airways would adopt RAF-pioneered routes, use adapted military air bases, and exclusively hire ex-servicemen to fly their planes. Imperial rule in mandated territories undergirded the mechanisms of travel there. At the same time, imperial visions shaped the global discourse of travel to Iraq. Focussing on one component of the travel industry can help illuminate this relationship.

This article focuses on the imperial roots of civil aviation in Iraq—especially the British airline Imperial Airways (1924–1939)—highlighting the connections between the RAF and nascent air tourism. I draw attention to how proponents of Imperial Airways talked about air travel in Iraq, both as a boon for the British Empire and as a means of “developing” the country itself. In this latter vein, promoters of “air-mindedness” emphasised Iraq’s antiquity for multiple ends. First, and perhaps most obviously, to make it more enticing for tourists. Second, they juxtaposed an image of Iraq as frozen in the past with aviation’s modernising potential. They framed colonial development as exciting for tourists as well as morally sound for the benefits it would bring to Iraqis themselves. In doing so, air travel promotion also worked to sell empire to a British public increasingly sceptical of mandatory rule’s costs.

Historians have long pointed to Imperial Airways’ role in charting out an “all-red route” across Britain’s colonial possessions beginning with a London-India service.<sup>2</sup> Following the recommendations of a government committee in 1923, Imperial Airways was formed through the merging of four private ventures. This new company soon after held a monopoly on British air transportation and received from the government both an initial capital investment and annual subsidies to help develop overseas air routes.<sup>3</sup> Apart from supporting the logistics of communication and movement of personnel across colonial domains, this company supported imperial ambitions in other ways. As Gordon Pirie has shown, Imperial Airways emerged at a time when there were “lofty expectations that air transport would modernise, maintain, protect, reassert and legitimate Empire.” Both “logic and romance were at work,” and in the interwar period British dominion over the air replaced nautical strength in becoming “the new imperial heroic.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “The Magic Carpet Up to Date,” *The Traveller’s Gazette*, March 1929.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Anthony Sampson, *Empires of the Sky: The Politics, Contests, and Cartels of World Airlines* (New York: Random House, 1984), 26–31. Scholarship on the company’s operations in the Middle East has tended to focus on the section of the route after Basra, drawing attention to the disputes between the company, the British government, and Persian authorities. See Teresa Crompton, “British Imperial Policy and the Indian Air Route, 1918–1932” (PhD thesis, Sheffield Hallam University, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.7190/shu-thesis-00184>. Nicholas Stanley-Price, “Imperial Airways and the Airfield at Sharjah, 1932–1939,” *LIWA (Journal of the National Center for Documentation & Research, UAE)* 3, no. 6 (2012): 24–38.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Higham, *Britain’s Imperial Air Routes, 1918–1939: The Story of Britain’s Overseas Airlines*, revised eBook edition (Stroud: Fonthill Media, 2017), 93.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Pirie, *Air Empire: British Imperial Civil Aviation, 1919–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 2.

Aviation served as a stand-in for British prestige; it “projected an idealised Britain to the Empire, and interpreted and refracted the Empire to Britons.”<sup>5</sup> Through advertisements, articles in specialist and general interest periodicals, and a plethora of both textual and visual ephemera, Imperial Airways—and, by extension, British imperial interest more broadly—permeated interwar cultural life.

Much of the historiography on empire and aviation in Iraq has focused on the RAF and its use of surveillance and bombing to instantiate British control.<sup>6</sup> Less obvious in the literature is how the RAF’s expertise, personnel, and equipment were foundational to the establishment of civil aviation.<sup>7</sup> In 1918, the RAF sought to develop a Middle East service passing through Iraq to be able to quickly mobilise airborne reinforcements to India, and undertook military operations in Iraq itself.<sup>8</sup> That same year the British formalised an ad-hoc civil administration over the former Ottoman provinces of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, and the RAF enforced this administration’s authority.<sup>9</sup> During the 1921 Cairo Conference, the Colonial Office’s Secretary of State, the Chief of the Air Staff, and other RAF leadership met and agreed on establishing an air route for service across the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> The RAF surveyed and operated an air route along those lines, using it to transport mail until Imperial Airways took over operations in 1927. The inextricability of civil and military aviation is an underdeveloped component in the literature of the RAF in Iraq. Drawing attention to this relationship offers insight into how to understand tourism’s “colonial baggage” in other contexts: specifically, how this seemingly civilian infrastructure both emerged out of—and further developed—imperial ambitions.<sup>11</sup>

This paper traces the history of civil aviation and tourism promotion in Iraq using a diverse range of sources, including Imperial Airways’ own records held at British Airways’ headquarters in Waterside. It begins by situating civil aviation within a longer history of transportation and colonial development rhetoric. As I will show, proponents of Imperial Airways praised the airline as a source of pride in Britain’s empire, capable of realising a decades-long ambition of turning Iraq into a commercially viable shortcut to India. Efforts to “open up” mandated possessions such as Iraq were conceived of as crucial to their development. This paper also foregrounds promotional material and travel accounts to show how this rhetoric of aviation and colonial development shaped perceptions of Iraq as a tourism destination.

## The Empire’s “Chosen Instrument”

“We have charted the Earth, we have charted the Heavens. We must chart the Air.” With this line in his 1920 address to the Royal Geographical Society, Controller-General of Civil Aviation Frederick Sykes situated Britain’s aviation efforts within a long genealogy of

<sup>5</sup> Gordon Pirie, *Cultures and Caricatures of British Imperial Aviation: Passengers, Pilots, Publicity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 5.

<sup>6</sup> David E. Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force, 1919–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation-Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 131–56; Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain’s Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 239–62; Priya Satia, “The Pain of Love: The Invention of Aerial Surveillance in British Iraq,” in *From Above: War, Violence, and Verticality*, ed. Peter Adey, Mark Whitehead, and Alison Williams (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 224–46.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald Butt’s *History in the Arab Skies* is a notable exception. Gerald Butt, *History in the Arab Skies: Aviation’s Impact on the Middle East* (Nicosia: Rimal Publications, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Frederick H. Sykes, “Imperial Air Routes,” *The Geographical Journal* 55, no. 4 (1920): 241–262.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 184–5.

<sup>10</sup> Roderic Hill, *The Baghdad Air Mail* (London: Edward Arnold & Co, 1929), 2–3.

<sup>11</sup> See the introduction to this special issue.

exploration and imperial prestige.<sup>12</sup> Other scholars have noted similar connections. As Eric Zuelow has pointed out in this special issue's afterword, "tourism and empire have long been closely linked," especially when it came to transportation.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, British political interest in charting out a more direct route to India had increasingly turned to Ottoman Iraq, resulting in government support for exploratory missions, archaeological expeditions, and other excursions in the name of formal and informal intelligence-gathering.<sup>14</sup> Several transportation development projects emerged out of this milieu, including British and Ottoman plans to develop steamship travel on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers as well as the ambitious Berlin-Baghdad railway scheme.<sup>15</sup> Belief in the land's economic potential—as well as both cooperation and conflict between the empires involved—defined these transportation schemes in the years leading up to World War I.<sup>16</sup>

Formal British possession of Iraq, however, ultimately differentiated interwar transportation rhetoric from its antecedents, and the commercial possibilities of aviation offered a new avenue through which these ambitions could be realised. English commentator Joseph Parfit justified postwar British control over Iraq by stressing its value for global aviation, describing the country as possessing "the natural junctions for some of the greatest and busiest of the world's future highways," where scores of business travellers, government officials, and tourists would pass through "when journeying from almost any part of Europe to any part of Asia and Australasia."<sup>17</sup> Throughout the early years of the mandate, other commentators continued to articulate this vision of Iraq as an imperial transit space benefitting Britain, Iraq, and the world.<sup>18</sup>

Members of the British government shared this view. In October 1919, an advisory committee submitted a report on plans for imperial air routes, concluding that the government's highest priority should be to chart a route from London to India.<sup>19</sup> Air Marshall Geoffrey Salmond, the senior RAF commander stationed in Iraq during the war, had already begun studying the possibilities of developing air routes from Baghdad to India on his own initiative.<sup>20</sup> Just a few years later, news of Imperial Airways' route development in the Middle East would give the aviation predictions of Parfit and others some credence.

Unlike in France and the Netherlands, the postwar British civil aviation companies—which, in 1924, would be amalgamated into Imperial Airways—initially operated without public funds or direct state support.<sup>21</sup> In 1924, however, the British government changed this "non-interventionist attitude."<sup>22</sup> It signed a ten-year virtual monopoly agreement

<sup>12</sup> Sykes, "Imperial Air Routes," 249.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Zuelow, "Afterword: Tourism and Empire," 1.

<sup>14</sup> See Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 23–58; Shawn Malley, "The Layard Enterprise: Victorian Archaeology and Informal Imperialism in Mesopotamia," in *Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753–1914*, ed. Zainab Bahrani, Zeynep Çelik, and Edhem Eldem (Istanbul: SALT, 2011), 99–123.

<sup>15</sup> Camille Cole, "Controversial Investments: Trade and Infrastructure in Ottoman–British Relations in Iraq, 1861–1918," *Middle Eastern Studies* 54, no. 5 (September 3, 2018): 744–68; Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Follard, *Dislocating the Orient: British Maps and the Making of the Middle East, 1854–1921* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Joseph T. Parfit, *Marvellous Mesopotamia: The World's Wonderland* (London: S.W. Partridge & Co., 1920), 22–3.

<sup>18</sup> See, especially, Richard Coke, *The Heart of the Middle East* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1925); Richard Coke, *The Arab's Place in the Sun* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1929), I; John Van Ess, *Historical Mesopotamia* (Basra: Times Press, 1924).

<sup>19</sup> Air Ministry Advisory Committee on Civil Aviation, *Command Paper 449: Report on Imperial Air Routes* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1919).

<sup>20</sup> Sykes, "Imperial Air Routes: Discussion," 265.

<sup>21</sup> Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes*, 44–64.

<sup>22</sup> Guy Vanthemsche, "Introduction: National Paths to the Sky. The Origins of Commercial Air Transport in Western Europe and the United States (1919–1939)," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'histoire* 78, no. 3 (2000): 859–60.

with Imperial Airways and began subsidising the company.<sup>23</sup> From the outset the company had found itself in a dire economic situation, discouraged by the slow pace of domestic civil aviation development and stiff competition in Europe.<sup>24</sup> It would find some financial respite in the Air Ministry's agenda for interwar aviation: developing a new "empire route," with Iraq serving as an important transit node to India. In this respect, the British, French, and Dutch were aligned in their efforts to connect colonial possessions to their respective metropolises.<sup>25</sup> To actualise this plan, the British government would rely on its "chosen instrument" of empire-wide aviation: Imperial Airways.<sup>26</sup> This aim would fundamentally shape the company's operations for the next fifteen years. By 1939 traffic on empire routes made up 90 percent of the company's total mileage.<sup>27</sup>

In his address to the 1926 Imperial Conference, the Secretary of State for Air, Samuel Hoare, highlighted the importance of air communications for the British Empire. Though focusing on civil aviation, Hoare qualified any strict separation from military aviation at the outset, remarking that they "are inextricably connected, and that the development of Imperial air lines [...] is a vital factor in the problem of Empire defence."<sup>28</sup> The Air Ministry wanted to develop an empire service to the Middle and Far East, connecting England, Egypt, Iraq, India, and Australia as quickly as possible.<sup>29</sup> Because of the relative fuel inefficiency of interwar aircraft, any aeroplanes operating in the region would need to stop frequently to refuel. This partially explains why the highest potential air routes the Ministry sketched out went exclusively through territories either formally held by the British—including the mandated territories of Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq—or in which they exerted a significant degree of political influence (such as Egypt). The groundwork would take at least two years of planning and negotiations between the Air Ministry and Imperial Airways.

Hoare's first step in setting up an imperial air route was to link England to India, and in December 1924 he tasked Undersecretary Philip Sassoon with devising a scheme on a budget of £50,000. Given this sum, Hoare understood that the route would be "an unpretentious service" initially "for the purpose of showing the flag," as he admitted in an internal memorandum.<sup>30</sup> Hoare forwarded this plan to the Chief of Air Staff Hugh Trenchard, elaborating that his view "is that apart from the commercial side of the question, which may be problematical, the political and possibly military advantage of getting the Indian Route started [...] is very great." Hoare requested Trenchard's—and thus, the RAF's—assistance in figuring out how to make the route affordable and operational right away.<sup>31</sup> After receiving a more detailed breakdown of the proposed scheme, Trenchard endorsed Hoare's views, replying "that even though the commercial side may be problematic the military and political advantages of opening a route from Cairo to Karachi, and eventually on to Singapore, are immense [...] Imperial Air Routes should connect up the different air

<sup>23</sup> Civil Air Transport Subsidies Committee, *Command Paper 1811: Report on Government Financial Assistance to Civil Air Transport Companies* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1923).

<sup>24</sup> Peter Fearon, "The Growth of Aviation in Britain," *Journal of Contemporary History* 20, no. 1 (1985): 26–34; Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes*, 101–2.

<sup>25</sup> Vanthemsche, "Introduction: National Paths to the Sky," 861.

<sup>26</sup> Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes*, 317.

<sup>27</sup> Gordon Pirie, "Passenger Traffic in the 1930s on British Imperial Air Routes: Refinement and Revision," *The Journal of Transport History* 25, no. 1 (March 2004): 63.

<sup>28</sup> Air Ministry, *The Approach Towards a System of Imperial Air Communications* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1926), v.

<sup>29</sup> Air Ministry, 9.

<sup>30</sup> "Memorandum from Secretary of State of Air Samuel Hoare to Undersecretary of State of Air Philip Sassoon" (December 12, 1924), Imperial Airways Board Papers, No. 25 (20 January 1925), British Airways Archive and Museum (BAAM).

<sup>31</sup> "Memorandum from Secretary of State of Air Samuel Hoare to Chief of Air Staff Hugh Trenchard" (12 December 1924), Imperial Airways Board Papers, no. 25 (20 January 1925), BAAM.

stations of the British Empire if possible, and that this should be the first consideration in commercial undertakings.”<sup>32</sup> On 2 January 1925, Hoare urged Sassoon to set up a meeting with Eric Geddes, Imperial Airways’s Chairman to see how soon the company could actualise this route.<sup>33</sup>

The next day, Sassoon met with Geddes to go over the proposed budget and details for the Air Council’s scheme. The Air Council envisioned a service running twice a week originating from either Egypt or Jordan to Karachi, using military planes and government facilities. Despite the different potential points of origin, one thing was clear: any route flying to India would go through Iraq. All materials, accommodations, spare parts, services, and other logistics would be paid for by the government. Echoing Hoare’s earlier memo to Sassoon, the stated purpose of the scheme was primarily to “show the flag,” and the possibility of regularising the service would be revisited at the end of the year.<sup>34</sup> Geddes, reporting to the Board of Directors, urged them to accept the proposal.<sup>35</sup> Up to this point, Imperial Airways had exclusively run domestic and European services, where they faced significant competition. Though the Air Ministry provided an annual subsidy, it was not enough to make these operations commercially viable.<sup>36</sup> The company needed a lifeline, and the chance to run an experimental empire service at virtually zero cost—with the promise of a monopoly over the government’s imperial air traffic—seemed to be it.

The Air Ministry’s proposal would both provide Imperial Airways with financial stability for the year and allow it to “blaze the trail” to India. The scheme would not be immediately profitable, Geddes admitted, but it could be in the future, giving Imperial Airways a way out of domestic civil aviation’s seemingly intractable stagnation. By the end of 1925, having gained practical experience of the route, both Imperial Airways and the government could be better equipped to deliver a profitable service to India.<sup>37</sup> The minutes of Imperial Airways’ 20 January Board of Directors’ meeting revealed that though a route from Kantara to Karachi would not be immediately practicable, one to Basra was.<sup>38</sup> The board continued to discuss the proposed agreement with the Air Ministry, primarily negotiating over an increased subsidy.<sup>39</sup> On 17 November 1925, Imperial Airways and the government came to an agreement. The new scheme would be a fortnightly service between Egypt and India with an annual subsidy of £93,600. Imperial Airways agreed to start running the Cairo-Basra branch within twelve months after signing the agreement.<sup>40</sup> In addition to government-funded provisions, the Chairman reported that the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) agreed to provide Imperial Airways with a free year of petrol at all stations between Iraq and India, a service valued at £6,000.<sup>41</sup> This news came just in time for

<sup>32</sup> “Memorandum from Chief of Air Staff Hugh Trenchard to Secretary of State of Air Samuel Hoare” (2 January 1925), Imperial Airways Board Papers, no. 25 (20 January 1925), BAAM.

<sup>33</sup> “Memorandum from Secretary of State of Air Samuel Hoare to Undersecretary of State of Air Philip Sassoon” (12 January 1925), Imperial Airways Board Papers, no. 25 (20 January 1925), BAAM.

<sup>34</sup> “Memorandum of a Conversation with Philip Sassoon” (13 January 1925), Imperial Airways Board Papers, no. 25 (20 January 1925), BAAM.

<sup>35</sup> “Memorandum from Imperial Airways Chairman Eric Geddes to the Board of Directors” (January 14, 1925), Imperial Airways Board Papers, no. 25 (20 January 1925), BAAM.

<sup>36</sup> Higham, *Britain’s Imperial Air Routes*, 101.

<sup>37</sup> “Memorandum from Imperial Airways Chairman Eric Geddes to the Board of Directors.”

<sup>38</sup> “Minutes of Imperial Airways Board of Directors Meeting” (20 January 1925), Imperial Airways Board Papers, no. 25 (20 January 1925), BAAM.

<sup>39</sup> “Minutes of Imperial Airways Board of Directors Meeting” (17 February 1925), Imperial Airways Board Papers, no. 27 (17 February 1925), BAAM.

<sup>40</sup> “Minutes of Imperial Airways Board of Directors Meeting” (17 November 1925), Imperial Airways Board Papers, no. 44 (17 November 1925), BAAM.

<sup>41</sup> “Memorandum from Imperial Airways Chairman Eric Geddes to the Board of Directors: Middle Eastern Service” (17 November 1925), Imperial Airways Board Papers, no. 44 (17 November 1925), BAAM.



Imperial Airways' first general meeting. The company's chairman Eric Geddes made clear in his speech to investors that Imperial Airways did not intend to confine itself to Europe, and the company's first step would be developing a route from Cairo to Karachi through Iraq.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, an earlier draft of the chairman's speech makes the company's imperial ambitions even more clear: Imperial Airways' "ultimate aim" would be nothing less than "an *all-red route* to India and to some of the far distant Dominions and Colonies."<sup>43</sup>

To achieve this "ultimate aim," Imperial Airways would rely heavily on the RAF. Already near the end of World War I, British civil and military aviation were intimately connected. Members of the Civil Aerial Transport Committee, formed in 1917, were broadly aligned in the belief that the development of a British transport system necessitated the coordination of military and commercial efforts, and that such a system was fundamental to the empire's defence.<sup>44</sup> The RAF were the first to inaugurate a route between Cairo and Baghdad, having chartered and operated an air mail service between the cities since 1921. The Cairo to Baghdad air route, according to one of its pilots, "could never have been pioneered by a civil organisation," though "the ultimate possibility of a civilian air route" was certainly in the minds of RAF planners.<sup>45</sup> Nearly every stop on Imperial Airways' Middle East service was either an active or former airbase. Even the main exception—the airstrip at Rutba Wells, built by the Iraqi government for Imperial Airways' use and also used as a police post housing armed infantry—was functionally a military installation as well.<sup>46</sup> The presence of army transports, in the words of one traveller, gave Rutba "a military air, and the strength of the buildings showed that they had been built with a view to withstanding gunfire if necessary."<sup>47</sup> The RAF's route had literally been marked out on the desert landscape by ploughed furrows, providing a visual navigation aid to pilots while also indicating safe emergency landing spots every twenty miles.<sup>48</sup> The RAF even published the handbooks that Imperial Airways pilots would later carry, a distillation of their experience in both establishing and maintaining the desert route.<sup>49</sup>

Imperial Airways' personnel frequently referenced their indebtedness to the RAF. Imperial Airways' first flight on the Middle East service departed from London in December 1927 and arrived in India in January the following year. Upon arriving in Delhi, Imperial Airways' General Manager George Woods Humphrey received a telegram from Imperial Airways Chairman Eric Geddes congratulating him and Middle East general manager Colonel Burchall on the flight's success. This "great achievement" was a testament to the success of British aeroplane engineers, designers, and builders, and demonstrated "to the empire the excellence of your organisation." Geddes concluded the telegram acknowledging "the help and invaluable cooperation of the Air Ministry both civil and military sides in inaugurating the service."<sup>50</sup> Though Imperial Airways received public recognition, Woods Humphrey acknowledged that compared to the RAF's work, all

<sup>42</sup> "Imperial Airways First General Meeting: Sir Eric Geddes's Speech," *The Times*, 30 December 1925.

<sup>43</sup> "Draft Copy of Imperial Airways Chairman Eric Geddes' Speech" (n.d.), AW/1/3896, BAAM. Emphasis mine.

<sup>44</sup> Alex M. Spencer, *British Imperial Air Power: The Royal Air Forces and the Defense of Australia and New Zealand Between the World Wars* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2020), 73–6.

<sup>45</sup> R. M. Hill, "Experiences on the Cairo-Baghdad Air Mail," *The Journal of the Royal Aeronautical Society* 32, no. 209 (May 1928): 387–8.

<sup>46</sup> Lucy Budd, "Global Networks Before Globalisation: Imperial Airways and the Development of Long-Haul Air Routes," *GaWC Research Bulletin* 253 (2007).

<sup>47</sup> Harold Butcher, "Flights to Bagdad Now Need No Magic Carpet: Where Ancient History Was Written," *New York Times*, 11 November 1928.

<sup>48</sup> Butt, *History in the Arab Skies*, 73.

<sup>49</sup> Royal Air Force, *Pilot's Handbook: Cairo-Baghdad Air Route*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1929).

<sup>50</sup> "Telegram from Imperial Airways Chairman Eric Geddes to General Manager Woods Humphrey" (9 January 1927), AW/1/6399, BAAM.

Imperial Airways really did was “come along with good machines and fly.”<sup>51</sup> The RAF’s presence in the country, according to Woods Humphrey in his letter to the RAF’s commanding officer in Iraq, merited special credit: “no one who has not actually flown from Egypt to India could possibly appreciate the amount of work the Royal Air Force have carried out in doing the pioneering of this route, without which it would have been quite impossible for [Imperial Airways] to have started.”<sup>52</sup>

### Imperial Air-Mindedness and Colonial Development

Even prior to 1924, Colonial Secretary Leopold Amery speculated that civil aviation would have a transformative impact on the “great undeveloped and almost unexplored regions of the world for which the Colonial Office is responsible.”<sup>53</sup> In the British press, Imperial Airways’ operations emerged as a tool for developing Iraq in multiple senses. First, in line with one understanding of development as the building of infrastructure to speed up commerce, aviation received praise for facilitating communications and trade across the empire: in the words of one commentator, the RAF-administered Middle East service brought “Baghdad into close touch with civilization” for the benefit of both administrators and “the commercial community.”<sup>54</sup> The press further emphasised this point when Imperial Airways began operating their own route. One journalist specifically highlighted the benefits imperial connectivity could bring to not only Britain but also each place the route connected.<sup>55</sup> As a 1933 article remarked, Baghdad had become the “Air Junction of the East,” and the author identified air travel as one of the reasons Iraq could skip “centuries of slow development” and become a “modern State.”<sup>56</sup>

Imperial Airways’ operations were also understood as a “modernising” force. This represents another continuity from the RAF’s surveillance and bombing operations in Iraq, which members of the British government justified on the grounds of its “civilising” effects.<sup>57</sup> In 1922, for example, RAF officer Robert Brooke-Popham rebutted claims that the Air Force was guilty of terrorism in Iraq by pointing to aircraft’s “distinct effect in pacifying and civilizing a semideveloped country.”<sup>58</sup> Arnold Wilson, who led the British administration in Iraq prior to 1921, described the RAF as “a great civilising force, and the most effective for the maintenance of law and order that had yet been known.” Though he praised their bombing and surveillance work, he said that establishing the Air Mail was the RAF’s most creditable work in Iraq.<sup>59</sup> By 1927, Imperial Airways began receiving praise alongside the RAF for purportedly “developing” Iraqis themselves, wresting them out of the past and ushering in a (vaguely defined) sense of modernity. Air policing, according to one reporter, had made Iraqis “as eager as school-boys to take flights.” Consequently, the number of local passengers flying the Imperial Airways route from Cairo to Basra was “rapidly increasing” as “Arabs desert camels for ‘planes.’”<sup>60</sup>

<sup>51</sup> “Letter from Imperial Airways General Manager Woods Humphrey to John Adrian Chamier” (14 January 1927), AW/1/6399, BAAM.

<sup>52</sup> “Letter from Imperial Airways General Manager Woods Humphrey to Air Vice Marshal John Ellington, Commanding Officer of the RAF in Iraq” (25 January 1927), AW/1/6399, BAAM.

<sup>53</sup> Sykes, “Imperial Air Routes,” 269.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Brooke-Popham, “Some Notes on Aeroplanes, with Special Reference to the Air Route from Cairo to Bagdad,” *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 9, no. 3 (3 January 1922): 143.

<sup>55</sup> “Croydon to Karachi,” *The Times*, 30 March 1929.

<sup>56</sup> C. E. Ward, “Bagdad an Air Junction for the East,” *The Bystander*, 22 February 1933.

<sup>57</sup> Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 239–62.

<sup>58</sup> Brooke-Popham, “Some Notes on Aeroplanes,” 140.

<sup>59</sup> Hill, “Experiences on the Cairo-Baghdad Air Mail,” 404, 406.

<sup>60</sup> “Arabs Desert Camels for ‘planes,” *Evening Telegraph*, 8 August 1927.



The juxtaposition of “timeless” Iraq with the cutting-edge modernity of flight was too rhetorically powerful for journalists to resist. Another reporter remarked on the sartorial contrast between Iraqi passengers, with some wearing clothes “centuries old in type” while others donned “the modern garb of European civilization.”<sup>61</sup> These changes led writers to credit Imperial Airways with helping Iraq develop “in the best spirit of the League of Nations,” thus aiding the British government in fulfilling the terms of its mandate over the country.<sup>62</sup>

British officials and commentators were not alone in endorsing air travel’s modernising effects. Members of the Iraqi government expressed similar appreciation for Imperial Airways, most notably the country’s monarch Faisal I. In 1926, Faisal identified Iraq’s “isolation from the great centres of population in Europe and the West” as the primary obstacle to development. From a “purely Iraqi point of view,” the new air route’s biggest potential lay in “the change that it will effect in the life of Iraq by removing that remoteness from the great world which has been such a drag upon our progress in the past.”<sup>63</sup> Iraqi promotion of civil aviation extended to other companies as well. In 1927, the French *Compagnie internationale de navigation aérienne* (CIDNA)<sup>64</sup> wanted to establish a regular air service between Aleppo and Baghdad and enquired about the Iraqi government’s position. The Iraqi Prime Minister and the Ministry of the Interior supported the proposal “in view of the geographical position of the City of Baghdad which makes it a natural junction for all air routes between Europe and Asia [...] and also in view of the fact that such service is expected to open a source for the increase of the country’s wealth.”<sup>65</sup> A year later, the High Commissioner to Iraq reported that the Iraqi government would support the French company’s operations provided that: “no expenditure by them on the provision of aerodromes or other facilities is required,” the company agrees to be subject to customs regulations, and the government maintain the right to refuse flights over certain areas.<sup>66</sup>

Though the Air Ministry made frequent references to the modernising effects of aviation, they also argued that Iraq was supposedly not yet developed enough to host foreign airlines. The “all-red routes,” in truth, were only viable through cooperation with Imperial Airways’ continental rivals, as the company needed European (and especially French) permission to connect the Middle East route to their services originating in London. As mentioned earlier, Imperial Airways ceded much of the European market so the company could prioritise their empire routes. At the same time, the company hoped that increased cooperation, especially in the form of timetable standardisation, would result in an increase in European travellers using Imperial Airways’ empire services.<sup>67</sup>

Within British imperial air space, however, the Air Ministry took a harsh stance against European cooperation. In a meeting with a CIDNA representative, Samuel Hoare outlined the difficulties facing the French company’s proposed operations. In the Air Ministry’s view, Iraq was “not yet ripe for the development of further civil air services. There is no chain of civil aerodromes and no administrative regulations have yet been framed to govern the operation of such services, and the meteorological and wireless facilities which exist have been created and maintained by the Royal Air Force for service purposes.” Hoare also pointed to a recent reduction in the British army garrison as evidence

<sup>61</sup> “Contrasts in Irak To-Day,” *Dundee Courier*, 7 March 1928.

<sup>62</sup> “A Letter from Baghdad to the Editor of *The Spectator*,” *The Spectator*, 6 August 1927.

<sup>63</sup> “Iraq and Air Travel: Views of King Feisul,” *The Manchester Guardian*, 1 January 1927.

<sup>64</sup> One of the precursor companies to Air France.

<sup>65</sup> “Translation of Iraqi Ministry of the Interior Letter to the Secretariat of the Council of Ministers” (16 August 1927), CO 730/123/4, The National Archives, UK (TNA).

<sup>66</sup> Letter from the Foreign Office to the Colonial Office (16 January 1928), CO 730/131/6, TNA.

<sup>67</sup> “Review of British Air Services Since the Inauguration of Imperial Airways Ltd.,” 7. AW/1/3799, BAAM.

that the safety of regular civil aviation over the Syrian border could not be guaranteed.<sup>68</sup> The RAF's Air Council expressed even more concern. The Council claimed that opening Iraq to foreign airlines would itself "introduce an element of unrest," and that French aeroplanes specifically were in danger because during the Great Syrian Revolt (1925–1927) France had "incurred the marked hostility of the Arabs."<sup>69</sup>

During a conference between the Colonial Office, Foreign Office, and the Air Council in January 1928, the Air Ministry explained that their policy was to give Imperial Airways "time to establish firmly British civil air services in Iraq before the operation of foreign air services was allowed and also to keep all regular foreign air services out of Iraq for as long as possible."<sup>70</sup> Eventually, the British allowed CIDNA to operate in Iraq as long as they did not use any RAF facilities.<sup>71</sup> The Air Council remained adamant in their opposition, however, and demanded that if they had to relent then the French ought to offer reciprocal permission for Imperial Airways to operate in Syria and elsewhere.<sup>72</sup> As a letter from the Air Ministry makes even more transparent on this point, "we want 'quid pro quos' for this concession, and it is always a good thing to have something up your sleeve to give away in case of difficulties."<sup>73</sup> Despite the Air Ministry's best efforts, they could not keep other airlines out of Iraq indefinitely. Within the next few years, both Air France and the Dutch airline KLM had established weekly services terminating in Baghdad.<sup>74</sup>

Nonetheless, Imperial Airways' proponents emphasised the route's potential for bringing tourists to Iraq's ancient ruins, thus fostering the country's development.<sup>75</sup> In anticipation of Imperial Airways' London to Karachi route, the Air Ministry's Undersecretary of State Philip Sassoon conducted an inspection of Britain's overseas stations. His journey to and from Karachi took him through Iraq twice, and each time he flew over and observed sites of antiquity including Ctesiphon, Ur, and Babylon. Sassoon even stopped at Ur as something of a tourist himself, meeting with archaeologist Leonard Woolley, the leader of the excavations at Ur. Sassoon mused that with Imperial Airways' new route—and the proper developments in communications, bridges, railways, and hotel accommodations—Baghdad "must eventually become an immense tourist centre." Sassoon predicted that Iraq's capital "will be as thronged as are Cairo and Luxor by visitors drawn by the discoveries of the excavators, by the strange charm of an oriental city and the delights of a perfect winter climate." Thanks to Imperial Airways' expansion of air communications, Sassoon speculated that "Baghdad will have her full share in that development, and it may be that a new day of splendour is dawning for that ancient city."<sup>76</sup>

The American press also updated readers on the Imperial Airways route through Iraq. Reporting on King Faisal I's journey to London via Imperial Airways in 1927, an article in the *New York Times* proclaimed that "the Magic Carpet has been perfected [and] now

<sup>68</sup> "Note of Interview Between the Secretary of State [Samuel Hoare] and General Duval of the CIDNA on Friday, 15 July 1927," CO 730/123/4, TNA.

<sup>69</sup> Letter from J.A. Webster, Assistant Secretary of the Air Ministry, to the Foreign Office (7 June 1927), CO 730/123/4, TNA.

<sup>70</sup> "Notes of a Conference Held at the Air Ministry" (22 May 1928), CO 730/131/6, TNA.

<sup>71</sup> Given the Iraqi government's no-expenditure stipulation mentioned above, this decision in effect put the burden on the French company to build and maintain their own facilities.

<sup>72</sup> Letter from J.A. Webster to the Foreign Office (16 January 1928), CO 730/131/6, TNA.

<sup>73</sup> Letter from the Air Ministry to the Colonial Office (21 January 1928), CO 730/131/6, TNA.

<sup>74</sup> Cook's *Traveller's Handbook to Palestine, Syria and Iraq* (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1934), 9. For more on imperial cooperation and competition in navigating the region's airspace, see: Vincent Capdepuy, "Proche ou Moyen-Orient? Géohistoire de la notion de Middle East," *L'Espace géographique* 37, no. 3 (2008): 232–4.

<sup>75</sup> See also: Laith Shakir, "A Land Made Fit for Tourists: Thomas Cook, Tourism Promotion, and Colonial Development in Iraq, 1920–1932," *Journal of Tourism History* 16, no. 2 (2024): 133–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1755182X.2023.2218343>.

<sup>76</sup> Philip Sassoon, *The Third Route* (London: Heinemann, 1929), 121.

operates with a whirlwind motor.”<sup>77</sup> Another article praised Britain for making the country accessible to archaeologists during the mandate period, which consequently stimulated travel to Iraq. For the “increasing numbers” of tourists, the author mentioned panoramic views of Babylon and Nineveh via low-flying aircraft as one especially enticing travel feature.<sup>78</sup> *The Christian Science Monitor* reported that the Cairo-Basra service “flies over the most famous route in the history of mankind,” connecting “the land of the Pharaohs with the Holy Land” and bringing “Babylon and Ur all within 24 hours.”<sup>79</sup> Imperial Airways was also featured in publications marketed directly at potential American tourists, encouraging them to fly and see Iraq for themselves.<sup>80</sup>

U.S. periodicals embraced the potential of imperial tourism to develop Iraq. One correspondent praised mandatory rule for encouraging the development of luxury hotels in Baghdad, benefitting both the English and the “comfort of the natives” at the same time, and that the day would soon come for Baghdad to emerge as an essential tourist destination.<sup>81</sup> One review of Sassoon’s *The Third Route* almost exclusively focused on the “most interesting and unique part of the book” discussing Iraq, “so aptly described as the ‘middle of the world.’” Agreeing with Sassoon, the reviewer claimed that only aviation made it possible for travellers to “obtain a complete impression of a foreign city,” and when the Imperial Airways route becomes more frequently used, the resulting tourist traffic would completely transform Iraq.<sup>82</sup> An article in the *New York Times* proclaimed that “flights to Baghdad now need no magic carpet,” and that while the city was “still strongly linked with the past,” aeroplane traffic had made it “part of this commercial age, [established] more firmly than ever as one of the important capitals on this planet.”<sup>83</sup> Tourism promoters in the U.S press conceived of potential travellers as both the agents and beneficiaries of development in Iraq, at times in surprising ways. Per one enthusiastic article on “travel-shopping,” the development of air travel—alongside motorcar routes and railway lines—was responsible for transforming commerce in Iraq. Imperial transit routes have “opened up desert waste into new communities and shops,” while “government regulations” have been put in place to aid travel-shoppers.<sup>84</sup>

### Riding the Magic Carpet: Imperial Airways’ Passenger Traffic

Most of the literature on Imperial Airways’ empire routes has emphasised its value for speeding up communication, namely, through its air mail service. Comparatively little attention has been paid to passenger traffic. Robin Higham’s *Britain’s Imperial Air Routes, 1918–1939*, published in 1960, served as the definitive text on Imperial Airways’ passenger traffic for decades. As Gordon Pirie has pointed out, however, due to obfuscatory passenger statistics, it is difficult to know how many people travelled on Imperial Airways’ services on a given route, or why they did so. However, his analysis suggests that the

<sup>77</sup> “Bagdad Flies to London,” *NYT*, 8 August 1927.

<sup>78</sup> Madeleine Miller, “Trailing Bible History: Travel in the Near East Is Stimulated by The Discoveries of Archaeologists,” *NYT*, 10 February 1935.

<sup>79</sup> “Jerusalem to Babylon Now a Brief Trip: Air Service in Holy Land Shows 102,677 Miles Flown in Total of 1087 Hours,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 28 November 1927.

<sup>80</sup> Thurston Macauley, “Wings Over Europe’: A New Magic Carpet to Bagdad!,” *The Cunarder: A Travel Magazine*, July 1929.

<sup>81</sup> M.T.G., “In Modern Bagdad,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 24 April 1928.

<sup>82</sup> Henry Cabot Lodge, “Over Iraq,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 8 December 1929.

<sup>83</sup> Harold Butcher, “Flights to Bagdad Now Need No Magic Carpet: Where Ancient History Was Written,” *NYT*, 11 November 1928.

<sup>84</sup> T. E. Griswold, “Shopping around World Goes Modern: Orient Shops Specialize for the Tourists,” *The Sun*, 13 October 1935.

company catered in large part to business travellers and government officials.<sup>85</sup> Though many passengers travelled for work, that did not prevent them from sightseeing as “incidental tourists.”<sup>86</sup> One American, for example, spent several months in Iraq on business and, while there, he took the time to see the country’s ancient ruins and Great War battlefields.<sup>87</sup> Other businessmen-turned-tourists documented their travel experiences and published them in the *Imperial Airways Gazette*.<sup>88</sup>

Initially, the prices for a Cairo-Baghdad ticket and a Cairo-Basra ticket were £41 and £51, respectively.<sup>89</sup> Imperial Airways decided that starting 6 April 1927, the Middle East service would increase to a weekly service.<sup>90</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that passengers showed interest in travelling to (and through) Iraq. By August, the company boasted about a “steady stream of passengers” travelling to Iraq for business and/or pleasure and instituted a 25 percent reduction in fares across the route to “further popularise this service.”<sup>91</sup> In the following September, the price for air travel between Baghdad and Basra dropped another £7.<sup>92</sup> The Colonial Office expressed confidence that the rise in passenger traffic to Iraq required the construction of new airports.<sup>93</sup> A year later, Imperial Airways reported a 48 percent increase in passenger traffic revenue on the Cairo-Baghdad-Basra leg of the service.<sup>94</sup> From September until November 1932, Imperial Airways opened an experimental weekly service between Ramleh and Basra due to high demand for transit between Palestine and Iraq.<sup>95</sup>

Throughout the 1920s Iraq became an increasingly popular destination for literary travellers and (by extension) their armchair tourist readers, who imagined the country as both ancient and modern.<sup>96</sup> Travelogues from air passengers especially drew attention to this dynamic because their mode of transit seemed to heighten the contrast between the two senses of time. The aeroplane represented the most novel transportation method for many in the late 1920s, serving as an emblem of the modern world. As Elizabeth Bell has noted, in writing from the perspective of passengers on a commercial service—rather than independent explorers or trailblazing aviators—the authors of these travelogues “presented the common person with the possibility of participation in that movement.”<sup>97</sup> Even if the cost of flying was prohibitive for most people, these accounts invited readers to make the journey in their minds.

More tangibly, travelling by air literally and figuratively offered a new perspective for travellers and their readers. Aviation’s bird’s eye view was fundamentally distinct from the optics of other forms of transit. Writers and photographers emphasised this novelty in their accounts. In the case of Iraq, this modern view revealed the land’s antiquity by making ruins more visible. For archaeologists working in the country, the omnipresence

<sup>85</sup> Pirie, “Passenger Traffic.”

<sup>86</sup> Gordon Pirie, “Incidental Tourism: British Imperial Air Travel in the 1930s,” *Journal of Tourism History* 1, no. 1 (March 2009): 49–66.

<sup>87</sup> “Giersbach Returns from Trip to Iraq,” *Green Bay Press Gazette*, 13 April 1933.

<sup>88</sup> Chandra Bhimull, “Reshaping Empire: Airline Travelers and Colonial Encounters in the 1930s,” *Transfers* 3, no. 1 (2013): 45–64.

<sup>89</sup> *Imperial Airways Timetable: Summer 1927*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1927.

<sup>90</sup> “Minutes of Imperial Airways Board of Directors Meeting” (14 March 1927), Imperial Airways Board Papers, no. 64, BAAM.

<sup>91</sup> “Cairo-Baghdad-Basra Service,” *Imperial Airways Monthly Bulletin*, August 1927.

<sup>92</sup> “Middle East,” *Imperial Airways Gazette*, August 1928.

<sup>93</sup> “Colonial Office Telegram” (June 1928), CO 730/131/6, TNA.

<sup>94</sup> “Company Meetings: Imperial Airways,” *The Times*, 26 September 1929.

<sup>95</sup> “New Desert Air Service,” *Imperial Airways Staff News*, 6 September 1932.

<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth S. Bell, “Dashing off to Baghdad: A Sense of Place in a Piece of Time,” *South Atlantic Review* 61, no. 4 (1996): 39–52.

<sup>97</sup> Elizabeth S. Bell, *Sisters of the Wind: Voices of Early Women Aviators* (Pasadena, CA: Trilogy Books, 1994), 10.

of the RAF enabled them to survey and document potential excavation sites. Aerial archaeological surveying emerged in the country during World War I, when it became clear that the same optic used for military surveillance and bombardment could be of use to excavators as well.<sup>98</sup> This aerial perspective represents another continuity between military and civil aviation. The popularisation of aerial photography emerged out of Britain's control of Iraq both during and after World War I, where the RAF seriously applied the practice for geographic surveying and reconnaissance for the first time.<sup>99</sup> Air travelogues reproduced and circulated the same vantage points as RAF reconnaissance and bombing planes, repackaging a tactical perspective as an aesthetically pleasing tourist view with a (sometimes explicit) endorsement of Britain's colonial development agenda.

On the Middle East routes especially, pilots flew at a lower than usual altitude to assist with navigation and followed a furrow ploughed in the desert, a practice the RAF inaugurated.<sup>100</sup> The lower altitude and slower speeds enabled Imperial Airways passengers to do much of their sightseeing from the air while recording their observations for audiences back home.<sup>101</sup> Travelogues from Middle East service passengers recorded their delight in seeing Iraq's ancient past. In an article describing "what the traveller by air sees in his flight over one of the most historic regions of the Earth," journalist Charles Grey demonstrated that air tourists already knew what to expect before every setting foot in an aircraft: vivid scenes from the Bible, desert expanses "such as one sees in sheikh films," and Baghdad, "a picture of oriental magnificence as illustrated in art editions of *The Arabian Nights*."<sup>102</sup> Another article published in *The Field's* "Travel and Colonisation" section documented an early journey from Cairo to Baghdad from a passenger's perspective. This traveller noted that from Rutba to Baghdad, the pilot flew lower and lower so the unnamed author and (and his sole co-passenger, "a spirited old American lady") could see historical sites en route. These sites included "a Babylonian *Ziggurat*, nearly 4,000 years old and now crumbling away; then the golden domes of Khadimain, and the tomb of Queen Zabaida, one of the wives of Haroun al Raschid." Despite inclement weather and an emergency landing earlier in the journey, the author described the experience as a "wonderful journey" and an experience that "I would not have missed for worlds."<sup>103</sup>

Other testimonials reinforced the perception of Iraq as existing in the ancient and modern worlds simultaneously. In her self-published memoirs, Harriet Camac documented her experience flying on Imperial Airways' Karachi-London route in its first six months of operation and included photographs she took during the voyage. One depicts a camel transporting cargo with Camac's aeroplane in the background, printed with the caption "means of transport, old and new." In Camac's words, she took the photograph "in order to contrast this ancient means of transport with modern air conveyance."<sup>104</sup> Through the interplay of text and image, Camac's memoirs invite the reader to imagine the romance of a novel, ancient places juxtaposed with the (increasing) mundanity of conceivably going there through a regularised commercial service. For some, even being confronted with the "reality" of an Iraq which did not live up to colonial fantasy did nothing to dampen their views. In the words of one travel writer responding to those who say

<sup>98</sup> Leo Deuel, *Flights into Yesterday: The Story of Aerial Archaeology* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969), 16–9.

<sup>99</sup> Caren Kaplan, *Aerial Aftermaths: Wartime from Above* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 139.

<sup>100</sup> Peter Lyth, "The Empire's Airway: British Civil Aviation from 1919 to 1939," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 78, no. 3 (2000): 865–887.

<sup>101</sup> Pirie, "Incidental Tourism," 59–62.

<sup>102</sup> Charles G. Grey, "The New Desert Route to India: What the Traveller by Air Sees in His Flight Over One of the Most Historic Regions of the Earth," *The Sphere*, January 8, 1927.

<sup>103</sup> "The New Way to Baghdad," *The Field*, 12 May 1927.

<sup>104</sup> Harriet Camac, *From India to England by Air* (New York: privately published, 1929), 6.



there is little to see in Iraq: "I do not know. All my life I have been enthralled by the Arabian Nights, and I shall never see it except through the eyes of illusion."<sup>105</sup>

Air travellers compared Iraq's past glories to the land's centuries of stagnation under Ottoman rule. Passing through Baghdad on the way to Australia, one traveller decried the Ottomans for despoiling the glories of "Fair Babylonia," blaming them for turning a "country of milk and honey, a land of pomp and luxury that led the civilization of the world" into a "void of marsh and wasteland."<sup>106</sup> All was not lost, however. Viewing Iraq from the air, he mused that "the possibilities of development are infinite and the potentialities golden—a land of suspended fertility, where animation and prosperity lie for the time dormant—a wondrous garden where centuries of neglect and rapine have reaped desolation and barrenness."<sup>107</sup> These aerial eyewitness testimonies drew attention to Iraq's romantic antiquity, emphasising that these views were available to anyone who purchased an Imperial Airways ticket. At the same time, some writers claimed that under British colonial rule, the glories of civilisations past could be revitalised. They imbued civil aviation with the moral imperative of mandatory control more broadly, bolstering rhetoric in defence of Britain's empire.

### "Air-Jaunting" Over Iraq: Chartering Imperial Airways

A related and underdiscussed aspect of Imperial Airways' operations was its charter business.<sup>108</sup> Though the number of charter passengers was marginal, accounts of these journeys in the press generated interest in Iraq's tourism potential. Most charter clients were likely businessmen, journalists, and government officials, but their work did not prevent them from enjoying leisure travel. One journalist hired an Imperial Airways plane to take him from Baghdad to Khanaqin en route to Afghanistan. Instead of wasting the plane's twelve-seat capacity on a single traveller, American consul John Randolph took the opportunity to reserve seven spots and invited guests to join the journey to Khanaqin. Ida Donges Staud, a schoolteacher in Baghdad who wanted to ride in an aeroplane for the first time, took Randolph up on his offer. Later she recalled that when anyone back in America asked her if she knew anything about magic carpets in Iraq, she would reply: "yes, I have traveled on [one], and that shortly after coming to Baghdad."<sup>109</sup>

Other charter customers took a professional interest in seeing ruins from the air. In 1932 Charles Breasted—the son of James Henry Breasted, archaeologist and founder of the University of Chicago's Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures (formerly known as the Oriental Institute)—chartered a plane to fly across the region and document the Institute's archaeological work on film, including two excavations in Iraq. Afterwards, Charles remarked that through the telecommunications infrastructure supplied by the British Marconi company, the combined fortress, rest house, and airport at Rutba Wells had been transformed from an unremarkable post in the desert to "a haven for all the air services."<sup>110</sup> James Henry Breasted supported his son's filmmaking venture in part because of the public's demand for films "showing instructive travel and history, carrying people away from home and its present shadows of depression and

<sup>105</sup> Dorothy Dix, "Dorothy Dix in the Garden of Eden: No Wonder Eve Needed Only a Few Clothes, Writes Famous American Traveler, Sweltering in a Place Hotter Than Any Desert," *Daily Boston Globe*, 14 April 1929.

<sup>106</sup> Ross Smith, *14,000 Miles Through the Air* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1922), 64.

<sup>107</sup> Smith, 66.

<sup>108</sup> An important exception is Gordon Pirie's *Cultures and Caricatures*, which documents the experiences of various charter customers across the company's empire routes.

<sup>109</sup> Ida Donges Staud, *Living in Romantic Baghdad: An American Memoir of Teaching and Travel in Iraq, 1924–1947*, ed. John Joseph (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 205.

<sup>110</sup> Charles Breasted, "Flying through the Ancient Near East," *The Scientific Monthly* 36, no. 1 (1933): 63–4.



discouragement.”<sup>111</sup> Moreover, aviation promised to transform archaeological work itself. “On a magic carpet,” Charles said in a radio interview, “we had circled the major portion of the ancient Near East [...] I can conceive of the day—it may even be upon us now—when a far-flung archaeological organization will find its own aircraft indispensable to the maximum efficiency of its field work.”<sup>112</sup> For both James and Charles, the air traveller’s optic was not incidental to chartered business travel; it was, in fact, part of the job itself.

Others chartered Imperial Airways aircraft explicitly for tourism. Details from one tourist’s account gives some sense of what an itinerary by air would have looked like. In the spring of 1929, a group of travellers chartered an Imperial Airways aircraft for two weeks of sightseeing in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine.<sup>113</sup> Among them was Marie Oge Beale, an American socialite and wife of the diplomat Truxton Beale, who documented the experience in her book *The Modern Magic Carpet: Air-Jaunting Over the Ancient East*. Having grown up reading *The Thousand and One Nights* and attending Sunday school, Beale’s “youthful imagination”—like that of many of her generation—had long been spent virtually travelling to Iraq, this “realm of myth and legend.” For Beale, to see Baghdad, Basra, the ruins of Babylon, Nineveh, and Ur—and “above all, to fly to them, would be in an astounding way to revive and prolong that dream into waking hours.” She seized upon her invitation to join the charter group and “utilize the wonder of this age in exploring those of the remote past.”<sup>114</sup> Two years later, another client chartered an aircraft for six days of touring the region. This air tourist followed an itinerary Imperial Airways devised for him. His itinerary was subsequently published in *Imperial Airways Gazette* and included visits to “Baghdad, Ur of the Chaldees, Babylon, Ctesiphon, [and] Mosul (Nineveh).”<sup>115</sup> Based on these two itineraries, Imperial Airways’ air tourists were primarily interested in seeing the country’s sites of antiquity, supplementing their terrestrial visits with an aerial perspective.

Through its business alliances Imperial Airways participated in a broader effort to encourage travel to Iraq, especially aimed at tourists from the United States. The airline worked with the American branch of the travel firm Thomas Cook & Son, who also served as the U.S. based agents of two ocean liner companies: the Cunard Steamship Company and the White Star Line. This collaboration resulted in two cruise itineraries offering travel to Iraq beginning in the late 1920s: the Cunard Line’s “Around the World” cruise aboard the *S.S. Franconia*, and the White Star Line’s Mediterranean “Cruise de Luxe” aboard the *S.S. Homeric*. Both cruises featured special air tours to Baghdad and the “ruins of Mesopotamia.”<sup>116</sup> The guidebook for the 1929 *Franconia* cruise promoted several optional tours for the Around the World itinerary, including “Optional Tour No. 4: By Airplane Across the Holy Land and the Arabian Desert,” whose itinerary appeared in this article’s introduction.

One of the tour’s central attractions was to sightsee Babylon and Baghdad from the air.<sup>117</sup> In the words of one journalist, Baghdad, as well as the ruins of Ur of the Chaldees and Babylon, had long been inaccessible to the Western tourist. Now, in part

<sup>111</sup> James Henry Breasted to Harold H. Nelson, 7 March 1933, Director’s Office Correspondence, Oriental Institute Archives, University of Chicago. Reproduced and cited in Jeffrey Abt, *American Egyptologist: The Life of James Henry Breasted and the Creation of His Oriental Institute* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 383.

<sup>112</sup> Breasted, “Flying through the Ancient Near East,” 65.

<sup>113</sup> “Cairo Crowded with Americans,” *NYT*, 24 March 1929.

<sup>114</sup> Marie Beale, *The Modern Magic Carpet: Air-Jaunting Over the Ancient East* (Baltimore: J.H. Furst, 1930), 1.

<sup>115</sup> “Travel 2,000 Miles a Week and Save Twelve Hours a Day: Modern Methods in the Middle East,” *Imperial Airways Gazette*, May 1931.

<sup>116</sup> “Baghdad,” *The American Traveler’s Gazette*, August 1929.

<sup>117</sup> *The Supreme Travel Adventure: Around the World in the “Franconia,” 1929* (New York: The Kalkhoff Company, 1928), 83.

thanks to Imperial Airways, “the profit in sight-seeing facilities has caused capital to remove erstwhile difficulties [...] for the first time a passenger airplane service will fly over ancient camel routes,” where “the whirr of propellers will break the silence of the desert as the tourists wing their way from Jerusalem to the city of a Thousand and One Nights and back again.”<sup>118</sup> One newspaper advertisement promoted the *Franconia* cruise by exclusively focusing on this tour itinerary. Titled “By Airplane to Baghdad-Babylon-Hilla,” the advertisement touted flights passing over historical sites, promising travellers “the most complete world panorama.”<sup>119</sup> The White Star Line, Cunard’s rival, offered this same itinerary on their Mediterranean “Cruise de Luxe.” The *New York Herald Tribune* promoted the 1929 optional tour, reporting that Homeric passengers would have the opportunity to view biblical scenes from the air.<sup>120</sup> Another outlet advertised the Homeric air tour with the headline “Planes for Moses’s Route.”<sup>121</sup> The aviation tourism industry in Iraq both rhetorically and materially drew from mandatory rule in Iraq. It transformed the optics of aerial surveillance and bombardment, key tools of colonial policing in Iraq, into an exciting tourist attraction: the best way to unveil Iraq’s ancient past. The panoptic view from above and the tourist gaze had become one.

## Conclusion

Despite Iraq’s (nominal) independence from Britain and admission to the League of Nations in October 1932, many features of colonial rule remained. Most notably, the RAF continued to operate airbases in the country and reserved the right to commandeer civil facilities in the event of “external aggression.”<sup>122</sup> In a similar vein, Imperial Airways continued to use Iraq as an important link to other colonial domains. However, the company no longer could rely on being able to enact its will unilaterally. A month after Iraq’s independence, Imperial Airways’ management expressed hesitations about the future of their operations, citing euphemistic “political problems” on the route to India. With the advent of seaplanes—which did not need to land on the ground and thus did not “require the use of foreign territory”—the company speculated about leaving Iraq and running the India service via the Red Sea if the Iraqi government “squeezed [Imperial Airways] too hard.”<sup>123</sup> Though it did not prematurely cease operations in the country, Imperial Airways’ archives reveal mounting frustrations with the increasingly “acutely nationalistic” Iraqi government up until the company’s bankruptcy in 1939.<sup>124</sup>

The development and operation of the air route through Iraq reveals the tangible and ideational connections between colonial rule, aviation, and leisure travel. From its military inception to its civilian use, the route offered to fulfil several imperial objectives. It promised to speed up imperial communications not just in the mandated Middle Eastern territories but also across Britain’s eastward colonial dominions all the way to Australia. Especially in its civilian form, British commentators emphasised aviation’s potential as an agent of development, promising to bring wealthy tourists to not only

<sup>118</sup> “Winter Tourists on the Increase: Ticket Agencies Expect That They Will Spend \$26,620,000 in Steamship Fares This Season – Remote Places Made Accessible,” *NYT*, 29 January 1928.

<sup>119</sup> “Advertisement: By Airplane to Baghdad, Babylon, Hilla, a Trip within the *Franconia* World Cruise,” *Detroit Free Press*, 17 June 1928.

<sup>120</sup> “Air Tour of Holy Land Added to Winter Cruise,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 11 November 1928.

<sup>121</sup> “Planes for Moses’s Route: American Tourists Now to Fly over Sinai Desert to Jerusalem,” *NYT*, 4 November 1928.

<sup>122</sup> C.W.R. Long, *The Immense Failure: British Rulers of Iraq, 1914–1933* (Edinburgh: Humming Earth, 2017), 268.

<sup>123</sup> “Memorandum from Imperial Airways’ Managing Director George Woods Humphrey to Chairman Eric Geddes” (29 November 1932), 5–6, AW/1/3926, BAAM.

<sup>124</sup> “Ground Equipment and Organisation Iraq Area” (n.d.), AW/1/4317, BAAM.

bolster Iraq's economy but also "civilise" and "modernise" its people. Though less obvious in the extant literature, civil aviation's place in the tourism industry was constitutively, rather than incidentally, imperial. The infrastructures, personnel, and optics the RAF introduced to the country for the purpose of aerial surveillance and bombardment had, within a few short years, become alluring features for would-be travellers to Iraq. Discourses about Iraq's antiquity and the need for rapid transportation, which defenders of colonial development espoused to justify British control, had also become the language of tourism promotion. What air tourists expected to see in Iraq—and, more fundamentally, *how* they saw it—was inseparable from both the material and ideological trappings of empire.

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