

# Gertrude Bell's Observations on Afrin and Environs: A Review of Published and Archival Records

## I. Introduction: Gertrude Bell and the Syrian Landscape

### A. Gertrude Bell: Explorer, Archaeologist, and Chronicler of a Changing Middle East

Gertrude Margaret Lowthian Bell (1868-1926) stands as a towering figure of early twentieth-century exploration, archaeology, and political influence in the Middle East. A woman of formidable intellect, linguistic prowess, and physical endurance, Bell carved a unique path in fields overwhelmingly dominated by men. Her extensive travels across Greater Syria, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, and Arabia were not mere adventures but scholarly expeditions that laid the groundwork for her later, pivotal role in the formation of the modern state of Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Bell's profound understanding of the region was significantly enhanced by her fluency in several languages, including Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, alongside European languages such as French and German, which enabled a deeper level of interaction and comprehension of the diverse cultures she encountered.<sup>3</sup> This intimate knowledge, meticulously documented in her writings, diaries, and photographs, provided the foundation for her subsequent influence as an Oriental Secretary and key policy-maker within the British imperial administration.<sup>1</sup>

### B. Ottoman Syria in the Early 20th Century: A Region in Transition

Bell's Syrian sojourns, particularly her significant journey in 1905, unfolded against the backdrop of a declining Ottoman Empire. Greater Syria, at this juncture, was a complex mosaic of diverse ethnic and religious communities, simmering with nascent political aspirations and increasingly subject to the strategic interests of European powers.<sup>5</sup> The territories Bell traversed were on the precipice of monumental change, predating the cataclysm of the First World War, the collapse of Ottoman authority, and the subsequent imposition of new colonial borders that would irrevocably alter the political and social landscape of the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Her accounts, therefore, offer a valuable snapshot of a world and its societal structures that were soon to be transformed or to vanish entirely.

### C. Report Focus: Unearthing Bell's Record of Afrin and Its Environs

This report aims to meticulously examine Gertrude Bell's published works, archival materials, and photographic records to ascertain the extent and nature of her observations concerning the Afrin region of northwestern Syria and its surrounding areas, specifically including the Kurd Dagħ (Kurd Mountains) and the Jebel Semaan massif. It is acknowledged from the outset that direct, extensive mentions of "Afrin" as a specific town or administrative unit may be limited in her major publications. Consequently, this investigation adopts a broader regional

focus, scrutinizing her accounts for descriptions of the Afrin River valley, the broader mountainous hinterlands, and any identifiable archaeological sites or inhabited places within this geographical ambit.

#### **D. Contextualizing Bell's Observations**

Gertrude Bell's extensive documentation of her travels provides more than just a narrative of her journeys; it serves as an unintentional yet invaluable baseline for understanding the environmental, social, and political conditions prevalent in a historically significant but often under-documented region prior to the sweeping changes of the twentieth century. Her detailed writings and thousands of photographs capture aspects of landscapes, archaeological sites, and human settlements, many of which have since been dramatically altered by conflict, development, or deliberate destruction.<sup>3</sup> The Afrin region, Kurd Dagħ, and Jebel Semaan have themselves witnessed profound historical and more recent transformations.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Bell's observations, even when her primary focus might have been archaeological or centered on the broader contours of her journey, inadvertently preserve details of what one reviewer termed a "vanished world".<sup>1</sup> These details can inform scholarly inquiries into historical ecology, traditional settlement patterns, and the distribution of ethnic and social groups before the region was subjected to the forces of modern state-building and geopolitical conflict.

Furthermore, the nature of Bell's access and the networks she cultivated inevitably shaped the information she gathered and the perspectives she recorded. As a European woman traversing often remote and politically sensitive areas of the Ottoman Empire, she relied on local guides, the protection of Ottoman authorities where available, and the hospitality of tribal leaders and local notables.<sup>1</sup> Her social standing and official introductions often granted her entry into influential circles. Consequently, the information presented in her accounts, and indeed the very routes she was able to take, would have been influenced by the knowledge, interests, and political leanings of those who facilitated her travels. This suggests that her portrayal of regions such as Afrin and Kurd Dagħ might reflect the viewpoints of her hosts or the dominant groups in the areas she could safely access, potentially underrepresenting or overlooking the perspectives of marginalized communities or areas outside her immediate itinerary and her facilitators' spheres of influence.

## **II. Methodological Approach to Bell's Records: Published Works, Archives, and Photography**

#### **A. Primary Published Narratives: *The Desert and the Sown***

Gertrude Bell's most significant published work detailing her travels in Greater Syria is *Syria: The Desert and the Sown*, first published in 1907.<sup>1</sup> This book is a chronicle of her extensive journey in 1905, which took her from Jericho in Palestine northwards through what is now Jordan and Syria, eventually reaching Antioch (modern Antakya, Turkey).<sup>1</sup> This text, therefore, stands as the principal published source for identifying Bell's observations on northern Syria and the areas approaching the Afrin region. While her later work, *Amurath to Amurath* (1911), describes a journey further east along the Euphrates, it may offer contextual information

regarding her broader understanding of northern Syrian landscapes and societies.<sup>2</sup> Both texts will be scrutinized for direct or indirect references to the target geographical areas.

### **B. The Gertrude Bell Archive at Newcastle University: A Trove of Untapped Detail**

Beyond her published narratives, the Gertrude Bell Archive housed at Newcastle University represents an exceptionally rich resource.<sup>3</sup> The archive contains an estimated sixteen thousand letters, sixteen diaries, seven field notebooks, and approximately seven thousand photographs taken by Bell between circa 1900 and 1918.<sup>3</sup> These materials, particularly the diaries and letters contemporary with her 1905 Syrian journey, hold the potential for more specific, unembellished details that may not have been included in her polished publications. The digitization of a significant portion of this archive, including letters, diaries, and photographs, and its availability through a dedicated website with search functionalities, is crucial for this investigation.<sup>9</sup> The multilingual nature of some of Bell's correspondence and notes (including English, Arabic, French, and German) is also noted, although the digitized transcriptions are primarily in English.<sup>3</sup>

### **C. Photographic Evidence: A Visual Record of Time and Place**

Gertrude Bell was an accomplished photographer, and her photographic collection forms an invaluable part of her archive. These images offer visual documentation of landscapes, archaeological sites, architecture, and people she encountered.<sup>3</sup> The photograph albums are generally arranged by journey and date.<sup>4</sup> Specific albums covering her Syrian travels, such as those from her 1899-1900 journey and, critically, those from the 1905 expedition, are of paramount interest for identifying visual records of the Afrin region or its immediate vicinity.<sup>16</sup> These photographs can provide insights into the physical appearance of the area, the state of archaeological remains, and aspects of daily life at the turn of the twentieth century.

### **D. Interpreting the Layers of Record**

The process by which Gertrude Bell transformed her raw field notes, diary entries, and personal letters into published travelogues such as *The Desert and the Sown* likely involved a degree of selection, refinement, and even omission. Published works were crafted for a predominantly Western audience and adhered to the literary conventions of travel writing prevalent in the early twentieth century, which often balanced scholarly observation with engaging, sometimes romanticized, narrative.<sup>1</sup> Her diaries and letters, in contrast, represent more immediate, personal, and often candid records of her experiences and observations.<sup>3</sup> A comparative approach, therefore, is essential. Archival materials may contain fleeting mentions of smaller localities, unverified information, or personal reflections deemed unsuitable or too mundane for her published accounts. These very details could be crucial in piecing together her movements and observations in less prominent areas like the Afrin hinterland.

Similarly, Bell's photographic practice evolved over time. She began serious photography around 1899-1900, benefiting from more portable cameras like the Kodak, which allowed her to travel relatively lightly compared to those using cumbersome plate cameras.<sup>17</sup> By her 1905 journey through Syria, her competence as a photographer had grown considerably. Her established interests in archaeology and the historical significance of monuments would undoubtedly have influenced her choice of photographic subjects.<sup>2</sup> Consequently,

photographs taken in or near the Afrin region during this period would likely reflect her developing skill and her scholarly priorities, potentially focusing on ruins or striking landscape features. Any images capturing local inhabitants or settlements, even if incidental to her main focus, would be of particular historical value.

### **III. Bell's Published Accounts: *The Desert and the Sown* and the 1905 Journey**

#### **A. Overview of the 1905 Syrian Itinerary: Jericho to Antioch**

Gertrude Bell's 1905 journey, as chronicled in *The Desert and the Sown*, began in Jericho and proceeded northwards, traversing diverse landscapes and encountering various communities before culminating in Antioch.<sup>1</sup> The book's narrative suggests a challenging expedition, at times passing through regions described as being under the control of "warring Turkish tribes," indicative of the often tenuous hold of Ottoman authority in certain peripheries.<sup>1</sup> The northern leg of this journey, specifically her route from Hama and Aleppo towards Antioch, is of greatest relevance to the present inquiry, as it would have brought her into the geographical proximity of Jebel Semaan, Kurd Dag, and the Afrin River valley.

#### **B. General Observations on Northern Syria: Landscape, Peoples, Governance**

In *The Desert and the Sown*, Bell offers general observations on the landscapes of northern Syria, the diverse peoples she encountered, and the nature of Ottoman governance. She describes her intention to "show what the world is like in which they live and how it appears to them," stringing together "stories with which shepherd and man-at-arms beguiled the hours of the march, the talk that passed from lip to lip round the camp-fire, in the black tent of the Arab and the guest-chamber of the Druze, as well as the more cautious utterances of Turkish and Syrian officials".<sup>12</sup> Her commentary on Ottoman administration is nuanced; while acknowledging its shortcomings ("his rule is far from being the ideal of administration"), she also recognized the difficulties faced by officials in maintaining order among "turbulent elements".<sup>5</sup>

#### **C. Scrutinizing for Direct and Indirect References to Afrin, Kurd Dag, and Jebel Semaan**

A careful reading of *The Desert and the Sown* is required to identify any explicit or implicit references to the Afrin area. While the town of Afrin itself may not be named, descriptions of the Afrin River (historically known as Ufrenus<sup>10</sup>), the mountainous region of Kurd Dag (Kurd Mountains, a significant Kurdish area historically<sup>11</sup>), or specific archaeological sites within the Jebel Semaan limestone massif (such as the ancient city of Cyrrhus, near modern Nebi Hour, or the extensive ruins at Brad) would be highly pertinent.

Indeed, a crucial piece of evidence emerges from a German edition of *The Desert and the Sown*, titled *Am Ende des Lavastromes. Durch die Wüsten und Kulturstätten Syriens* (translated as *At the End of the Lava Flow: Through the Deserts and Cultural Sites of Syria*). The bibliographic notes for the German Wikipedia entry on Brad (a significant archaeological site in Jebel Semaan, very close to the Afrin region) directly cite page 251 of this edition, linking Bell's work to this specific location.<sup>19</sup> This strongly suggests that Bell visited and

described Brad, and by extension the Jebel Semaan area, in *The Desert and the Sown*. Furthermore, Bell is known to have written about the region around Antioch and Alexandretta, noting the "heavy mix between Turks and Arabs".<sup>13</sup> The Kurd Dagh lies in close proximity to Antioch and has a long history of Kurdish settlement.<sup>11</sup>

The following table synthesizes potential itinerary points from Bell's 1905 journey that are geographically relevant to the Afrin area, based on the general route of *The Desert and the Sown* and specific mentions like Brad.

**Table 1: Gertrude Bell's Potential Itinerary Points near Afrin (1905 Journey)**

Date (approx. 1905)	Location/Site	Source(s)	Brief Description/Observation by Bell (Anticipated from general focus)
April	Aleppo	<i>The Desert and the Sown</i> ; Bell's letters/diaries	Descriptions of the city, markets, encounters with officials and notables.
April	North/Northwest of Aleppo, towards Jebel Semaan	<i>The Desert and the Sown</i> ; Bell's letters/diaries	Journey through agricultural landscapes, possible encounters with local villagers.
April	Brad (Jebel Semaan)	<i>The Desert and the Sown</i> (per German edition reference <sup>19</sup> ); Bell's photographs (C019-C030, April 1905)	Detailed descriptions and photographic documentation of the extensive Byzantine ruins (churches, tombs, houses). Observations on the limestone landscape.
April/May	Cyrrhus (Nebi Hour, near Afrin River)	<i>The Desert and the Sown</i> (potential); Bell's letters/diaries/photos	Possible visit to the Roman and Byzantine ruins, observations on the Afrin River valley.
April/May	Region of Kurd Dagh (Kurd Mountains)	Bell's letters/diaries (potential, if traversed)	Descriptions of mountainous terrain, possible encounters with Kurdish inhabitants, observations on local customs or security if

			she passed through this area en route to Antioch.
May	Antioch (Antakya)	<i>The Desert and the Sown</i> ; Bell's letters/diaries	Descriptions of the city, its diverse population (noted as a "heavy mix between Turks and Arabs" <sup>13</sup> ), and surrounding landscape.

#### D. Interpreting Bell's Published Narrative

Gertrude Bell's characterizations of the local populations and the system of governance encountered during her 1905 journey, as presented in *The Desert and the Sown*, are a complex amalgamation. They undoubtedly reflect her genuine observations and interactions, the narratives she absorbed from her diverse interlocutors (ranging from shepherds and soldiers to Ottoman officials), and the intellectual and cultural preconceptions of an educated Englishwoman of her era.<sup>12</sup> Her expressed sympathy for the "unimportant persons" whose lives she sought to understand is a notable feature of her writing.<sup>5</sup> However, this is often juxtaposed with a tendency to frame "the Oriental" in terms that, while perhaps not intentionally derogatory, reflect the prevailing colonial-era discourses on cultural difference, such as her description of the Oriental mind as being "like a very old child...unacquainted with many branches of knowledge which we have come to regard as of elementary necessity".<sup>5</sup> Her descriptions of the people and conditions in northern Syria would therefore be layered, reflecting both empathetic engagement and the intellectual frameworks of her time. The very title of the German edition of *The Desert and the Sown* that references Brad – "Am Ende des Lavastromes" or "At the End of the Lava Flow" – is suggestive.<sup>19</sup> This title points towards a significant focus on the distinctive geology and the ancient ruins characteristic of the Jebel Semaan region, which is known for its limestone plateaus and the "Dead Cities." This aligns perfectly with Bell's established archaeological interests and her fascination with the layered histories of the lands she traversed.<sup>2</sup> It implies that her textual account of this specific area within *The Desert and the Sown* is likely to prioritize these aspects – the ancient past embedded in the landscape and the physical characteristics of the ruins. While she was a keen observer of contemporary life, her descriptions of, for instance, Kurdish or Arab villagers in the Jebel Semaan or near the Afrin valley, might be more cursory or framed primarily as they intersected with her exploration of ancient sites or the notable features of the terrain, unless these communities were directly involved in her archaeological investigations or logistical arrangements.

## IV. Archival Deep Dive: Letters, Diaries, and Unseen Notes from the Gertrude Bell Archive

### A. The Gertrude Bell Archive: Potential for Specificity

While *The Desert and the Sown* provides the polished, public account of Bell's 1905 journey, the Gertrude Bell Archive at Newcastle University holds the potential for uncovering more specific, unrefined, and perhaps more candid observations.<sup>3</sup> The archive's extensive collection of letters, diaries, and field notebooks from this period offers a more immediate window into her experiences.<sup>9</sup> These personal documents are more likely to contain fleeting mentions of smaller settlements, names of local individuals, details of daily travel, or observations about the Afrin region, Kurd Dagh, or specific sites in Jebel Semaan that were edited out or not elaborated upon in her published work.

#### **B. Targeted Searches: "Afrin," "Kurd Dagh," "Jebel Semaan," and Associated Terms**

A systematic search of the digitized archive is essential, employing keywords such as "Afrin," "Ifirin," the historical name for the Afrin River "Ufrenus" <sup>10</sup>, "Kurd Dagh," "Kurt Dagh," "Jabal Sim'an," "Djebel Semaan," "Cyrrhus," "Nebi Houri," and "Brad." Additionally, searching for names of known tribes or prominent local figures associated with these areas during the early twentieth century could yield relevant entries. A tantalizing, though somewhat opaque, reference in a secondary source links *The Letters of Gertrude Bell* to "Afrin" in a political context, suggesting that her correspondence might indeed contain mentions of the area, although the precise nature of this reference requires further investigation of the letters themselves.<sup>21</sup>

#### **C. Analyzing Potential Findings from Diaries and Letters (1905 and other relevant periods)**

The primary focus for archival research would be Bell's diary entries and letters written during the spring of 1905, particularly as her journey progressed north from Aleppo towards Antioch. Daily entries might record the names of villages passed, the nature of the terrain, river crossings (such as the Afrin River), encounters with local inhabitants, and conditions in areas like Jebel Semaan or the periphery of Kurd Dagh. Letters to her family, particularly her father Sir Hugh Bell and stepmother Florence Bell, were frequent and often detailed, containing personal reflections, descriptions of people and places, and accounts of her activities that might not have been intended for a wider audience. Any field notes specifically pertaining to archaeological surveys or ethnographic observations in the vicinity of the target regions would also be of immense value.

#### **D. Interpreting Archival Clues**

The presence or absence of specific terms like "Kurd Dagh" or detailed references to Kurdish populations in the Afrin area within Gertrude Bell's private papers would be highly significant. If such references exist, they would confirm her direct awareness and observation of these distinct geographical and ethnic realities. The Kurd Dagh, for instance, is a historically recognized Kurdish region adjacent to what is now Afrin District.<sup>11</sup> Bell was generally an astute observer of different tribal and ethnic groups she encountered throughout her travels.<sup>12</sup> Given that her private diaries and letters would be less filtered than her published narratives <sup>3</sup>, it is plausible that if she encountered distinct Kurdish communities in the Afrin/Kurd Dagh area and recognized them as such, these encounters would be recorded in these more informal documents. Conversely, the absence of such specific mentions, or the use of more generic terms like "mountain folk" or "villagers," might suggest several possibilities: the limitations of

her interactions in those specific locales, a perception on her part that the ethnic identity was not particularly salient in her encounters at that moment, or simply that her primary focus lay elsewhere, perhaps on archaeological remains or the broader sweep of the landscape. Furthermore, any logistical details recorded in her diaries related to traversing the Afrin Valley or the mountainous terrain of Kurd Dagħ would offer valuable indirect evidence of the region's characteristics and the prevailing local power structures. The Kurd Dagħ is a mountainous area, and the Afrin River carves a significant valley.<sup>10</sup> Travel through such terrain in the early twentieth century would undoubtedly have presented logistical challenges, including difficult paths, the need for reliable local guides, and potentially interactions with local authorities or tribal leaders for safe passage. Bell's diaries often included such practical details of her journeys.<sup>3</sup> Descriptions of these challenges, such as difficult river crossings, the state of tracks or roads, or the necessity of securing escorts, would illuminate not only the physical geography of the area but also provide glimpses into aspects of local control, security conditions, and the existing infrastructure (or lack thereof) in these Ottoman peripheries.

## **V. Visual Ethnography: Gertrude Bell's Photographs of the Region**

### **A. The Brad (Jebel Semaan) Photographs: April 1905 (C 019 - C 030)**

A key component of Bell's record concerning the environs of Afrin is her photographic work in Jebel Semaan. The German Wikipedia entry for Brad explicitly attributes photographs with reference numbers C 019 to C 030, dated April 1905, to Gertrude Bell's visit to this significant archaeological site.<sup>19</sup> Brad, with its extensive ruins from the Roman and Byzantine periods, is located in the heart of the Jebel Semaan limestone massif, a region geographically contiguous with and historically linked to the Afrin valley. These photographs, therefore, constitute primary visual evidence of Bell's presence and focus in an area very close to the modern Afrin district. While a sample page from the Gertrude Bell Archive's "On this day" feature for April 1905 shows other images<sup>23</sup>, a direct search within the archive's database using these specific reference numbers (C019-C030) is necessary to access and analyze these crucial images from Brad.

### **B. Other Relevant Photographic Evidence from Northern Syria (Album J, Album A etc.)**

Beyond the specifically identified Brad photographs, other albums within the Gertrude Bell Archive may contain images relevant to northern Syria from her 1905 journey or other travels that passed through the broader region. The archive's "Photograph albums" page lists several potentially relevant collections, including an "Album of photographs taken by Gertrude Bell while travelling in Turkey, Israel, Jordan and Syria in 1899 and 1900" and an "Album of photographs taken by Gertrude Bell while travelling in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and Iraq in 1909".<sup>16</sup> The 1909 album is likely Album J, from which images of Aleppo (J\_078, J\_053, J\_061) and Tell Ahmar (J\_127, J\_138) have been referenced in scholarly work on Bell's archaeology.<sup>18</sup> The photographs from the 1905 journey, including those from Brad, would be housed in a different album, potentially designated Album C or similar, based on the "C" prefix in the Brad photo references. A systematic review of these albums, focusing on images taken



in the Aleppo-Antioch corridor during the spring of 1905, is essential.

The following table aims to list some of the key photographs or photographic series that are confirmed or highly likely to be relevant, particularly those from Brad.

**Table 2: Relevant Photographs by Gertrude Bell in Northern Syria (c. 1905)**

Archive Reference No.	Date	Location (as identified)	Brief Description of Content (from available data or likely focus)	Link to Image (via Gertrude Bell Archive if digitized)
C019 - C030	April 1905	Brad, Jebel Semaan	Series of photographs documenting the extensive Byzantine ruins at Brad, including churches, tombs, domestic architecture, and overall site views. <sup>19</sup>	Searchable on Gertrude Bell Archive website.
(Other Album C photos)	April 1905	Jebel Semaan region	Landscape views, other archaeological sites in Jebel Semaan, possibly portraits of local guides or inhabitants encountered during her survey of the ruins.	Searchable on Gertrude Bell Archive website.
(Photos from Aleppo)	April 1905	Aleppo	Views of the city, citadel, mosques, khans, street scenes, potentially portraits, similar to those in Album J from 1909. <sup>18</sup>	Searchable on Gertrude Bell Archive website.
(Photos en route to Antioch)	April/May 1905	Northern Syria	Landscapes, river crossings (possibly Afrin River), villages,	Searchable on Gertrude Bell Archive website.

			any notable natural or man-made features encountered between Aleppo/Jebel Semaan and Antioch.	
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### **C. Interpreting the Visual Record: Landscapes, Ruins, and People**

Analysis of Bell's photographs from this region involves examining her choice of subject matter. Given her strong archaeological interests, it is highly probable that ruins and significant landscape features dominate the collection from areas like Jebel Semaan.<sup>15</sup> However, any depictions of local inhabitants, villages, agricultural practices, or scenes of daily life in or near the target areas of Afrin, Kurd Dagħ, or Jebel Semaan would be of exceptional historical value. These images serve as a visual record of sites and environments, some of which may have been significantly altered or even destroyed in the intervening century, underscoring the archival importance of her photographic legacy.<sup>7</sup>

### **D. Synthesizing Visual and Textual Narratives**

The photographic record from Brad and the broader Jebel Semaan area, when analyzed in conjunction with Bell's textual descriptions in *The Desert and the Sown* and potentially illuminated by her contemporary diary entries or letters, can create a far richer, multi-modal understanding of her experiences and observations in this specific area proximate to Afrin. Bell was both a prolific writer and a dedicated photographer.<sup>3</sup> The photographs from Brad, specifically dated to her 1905 journey which formed the narrative basis of *The Desert and the Sown*<sup>1</sup>, might capture visual details not elaborated upon in the text, such as the scale of a particular ruin, architectural specifics, or the general ambiance of the site. Conversely, her written accounts might name individuals, describe interactions, or provide context that the silent images alone cannot convey. A synthesized analysis of both media for the Jebel Semaan area will therefore provide a more holistic picture of her engagement with this landscape and its historical layers.

Should photographs from the Afrin Valley proper or the Kurd Dagħ be identified, their composition and subject matter could reveal Bell's aesthetic or scholarly priorities when encountering landscapes that were perhaps less monumentally endowed with ancient ruins compared to renowned sites like Palmyra or the major Mesopotamian cities she later documented. In such areas, her photographic focus might have shifted towards capturing "picturesque" rural scenes, distinctive geological formations, or what were then considered representative "types" of local ethnographic interest, if prominent ancient ruins were less of a draw. Such images, if they exist, would offer a different kind of historical data, shedding light on the contemporary environment and inhabitants of these less-explored territories.

## **VI. Bell's Descriptions of Inhabitants and Local**

# Conditions in Northern Syria

## **A. Encounters with Local Populations: Kurds, Arabs, Turks, Christians, Yezidis**

Gertrude Bell's writings often detail her encounters with the diverse populations of the regions she traversed. A key objective for this report is to extract any specific mentions of Kurdish communities or individuals in the vicinity of Kurd Dagħ, the Afrin Valley, or Jebel Semaan from her published works, letters, diaries, or photograph captions. The Kurd Dagħ, as its name suggests (Kurd Mountains), has a long history of Kurdish settlement, and the broader region of northwestern Syria has been ethnically complex.<sup>11</sup> Bell's awareness of distinct groups is evident; for example, a later photograph from a 1911 journey in Iraq depicts "Rock Cut Caves By A Spring, Inhabited By Yezidis," indicating her familiarity with this particular community, which also had a presence in parts of northwestern Syria.<sup>23</sup> Her general approach to cultural encounters was one of observing local customs ("'Ādat-hu: it is his custom") while maintaining her own, a strategy she believed garnered respect.<sup>5</sup> In the area around Antioch and Alexandretta, Bell noted a "heavy mix between Turks and Arabs".<sup>13</sup> Identifying how Kurdish groups or other minorities in the Afrin hinterland featured in her observations relative to these larger groups is a central point of interest.

## **B. Observations on Social Customs, Economy, and Daily Life**

Beyond ethnic or religious labels, Bell's accounts may contain valuable, albeit perhaps fragmented, details of village life, agricultural practices (such as olive cultivation, prominent in the Afrin region), pastoralism, local trade routes, or small-scale industries she might have observed in northern Syria. Descriptions of hospitality extended to her, insights into local social structures, family life, or inter-group relations, if present, would contribute to a richer understanding of the socio-economic fabric of the region in the early 1900s.

## **C. Commentary on Governance, Security, and Political Sentiments**

Bell frequently commented on the state of Ottoman administration in the peripheries of the empire.<sup>5</sup> Her observations on the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of Turkish governance in the areas north of Aleppo and towards the Amanus Mountains would be relevant. Any accounts of local power dynamics, such as the influence of tribal shaykhs or aghas (particularly in areas like Kurd Dagħ), or instances of lawlessness, banditry, or specific security concerns she encountered would shed light on the prevailing conditions. The mention of "warring Turkish tribes" controlling the route to Antioch in the overview of *The Desert and the Sown* suggests that security was a tangible concern.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, her reflections on the political sentiments of the people she met – any expressions of discontent with Ottoman rule, early stirrings of Arab consciousness, or articulations of local Kurdish or other communal identities – would be of considerable historical interest.

## **D. Interpreting Bell's Social Observations**

Should Gertrude Bell's records offer detailed descriptions of the ethnic and sectarian makeup of areas around Afrin, Kurd Dagħ, and Jebel Semaan, this information could serve as a valuable, albeit qualitative, data point for historical demographic studies of this complex borderland region. Northern Syria, at the turn of the twentieth century, was a mosaic of Sunni and Alevi Muslims (including Arabs and Kurds), various Christian denominations, Yezidis, and

other groups.<sup>11</sup> Bell was a keen, though not formally trained, observer of peoples and customs.<sup>5</sup> Her records provide a snapshot from a specific moment in the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> When cross-referenced with contemporary Ottoman administrative records (such as salnameler or provincial yearbooks), accounts from other travelers (if any exist for this specific micro-region at that time), and later Mandate-era surveys, Bell's specific observations on who lived where, their apparent livelihoods, and their interrelations can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of historical settlement patterns and ethnic distributions before the major demographic shifts of the subsequent decades. Her commentary on "security" or "disorder" in the region, such as the reference to "warring Turkish tribes" or "turbulent elements" <sup>1</sup>, would reflect both the actual conditions on the ground and, inevitably, the perceptions and anxieties of a European woman traveler in unfamiliar and sometimes volatile territory. Analyzing these comments can help to gauge the extent of effective Ottoman state control in these northern Syrian peripheries versus the degree of autonomy exercised by local actors, such as tribal confederations in Kurd Dagħ or other mountainous areas. Her accounts of security incidents, the need for escorts, or the reliance on local notables for safe passage offer practical insights into the realities of governance, the reach of imperial authority, and the influence of local power brokers in the areas near Afrin during the final decades of Ottoman rule.

## **VII. Bell's Perceptions: Archaeological Focus and Colonial Gaze**

### **A. The Archaeologist's Eye: Documenting Ruins and Layered Histories**

Gertrude Bell's primary academic training and enduring passion lay in archaeology and history.<sup>2</sup> This scholarly inclination heavily influenced her choice of routes, the sites she meticulously documented, and the lens through which she often viewed the lands and peoples she encountered. Her descriptions and photographs of the Jebel Semaan region, particularly sites like Brad, are likely to focus extensively on its rich legacy of Byzantine churches, monasteries, and other ancient ruins. This archaeological focus was a defining characteristic of her work. Bell also exhibited a tendency, common among some of her contemporaries, to see the contemporary inhabitants of these historically resonant landscapes through the prism of a deep, often romanticized, past. She wrote of being "enchanted by a belief that in the tribal peoples of Syria and Arabia she had discovered something uncorrupted by her own industrial civilisation, something true and timeless".<sup>2</sup> Such a perspective could well have colored her views of the rural populations she encountered in or near the Afrin region, potentially framing them as living links to an ancient world rather than as communities with their own contemporary complexities.

### **B. Understanding Bell's Perspective within the Colonial Context**

It is essential to acknowledge that Gertrude Bell was a product of her time, her class, and her imperial British background. Her views on "the Orient," the efficacy of Turkish governance, and the characteristics of local peoples were inevitably shaped by the prevailing colonial attitudes and intellectual frameworks of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup>

While she often displayed considerable empathy and a genuine desire for understanding, her interpretations were nonetheless filtered through this colonial gaze. Although her more formal role as an intelligence gatherer and political advisor for the British government became more pronounced during and after World War I<sup>3</sup>, her position as a knowledgeable and well-connected British national traveling in sensitive Ottoman territories might have subtly influenced her observations and interactions even during her 1905 journey.

### **C. The Interplay of Scholarly Interest and Broader Contexts**

Gertrude Bell's profound archaeological focus, while resulting in invaluable historical records of ancient sites, many of which have since deteriorated or been destroyed<sup>15</sup>, may have inadvertently led her to under-document or engage less deeply with the contemporary socio-political complexities of certain regions she traversed. For areas like the Afrin Valley or the Kurd Dagħ, if they lacked the monumental antiquities that typically captured her primary attention (as found abundantly in Jebel Semaan with sites like Brad<sup>19</sup>), her record might be correspondingly less detailed regarding current local issues. Her engagement with the contemporary inhabitants might have been more superficial or primarily logistical unless their lives directly intersected with her archaeological pursuits, such as providing labor for minor excavations, guiding her to ruins, or offering hospitality. This is not to diminish her observational acuity but to recognize the hierarchy of her interests.

Furthermore, Gertrude Bell's writings and photographic archive, despite her individual scholarly motivations and often empathetic portrayals, contributed to the broader Western colonial corpus of knowledge about the Middle East. This body of knowledge, in turn, informed and often legitimized imperial policies and interventions.<sup>7</sup> Her detailed descriptions of ethnic groups, tribal structures, perceived levels of "civilization" or "disorder," and the administrative capacities of the Ottoman state could be, and indeed were, utilized by colonial administrators and strategists, sometimes in ways that may have diverged significantly from her original intent or personal views. Her very ability to travel extensively and gain access to remote areas was, in part, facilitated by the existing imperial dynamics and the prestige associated with her nationality and connections.<sup>1</sup> Thus, even her scholarly and travel-oriented work on regions like northern Syria had inherent political dimensions, contributing to how these regions and their peoples were perceived, understood, and ultimately managed by external powers during a critical period of geopolitical transformation.

## **VIII. Conclusion: Synthesizing Bell's Contribution to the Historical Record of Afrin and Surrounding Areas**

### **A. Summary of Key Findings**

This review of Gertrude Bell's published works, archival materials, and photographic collection indicates that while direct, extensive textual discussions of "Afrin" as a distinct town or a primary focus of her 1905 journey are unlikely to be found in her major publication, *The Desert and the Sown*, her records are nonetheless highly relevant to understanding the broader region. Strong evidence points to her visit and documentation of Brad in the Jebel Semaan massif in April 1905, an area geographically and historically connected to the Afrin valley.<sup>19</sup>

Her photographs from Brad (C019-C030) represent a crucial visual record. Her route from Aleppo to Antioch would have taken her through or near the Afrin River valley and the Kurd Dagħ. The primary focus of her descriptions in *The Desert and the Sown* concerning Jebel Semaan is anticipated to be archaeological, centered on its Byzantine ruins and distinctive landscape. The potential for more specific, albeit perhaps fleeting, mentions of the Afrin River, local villages, or Kurdish inhabitants of Kurd Dagħ lies within her unpublished diaries, letters, and field notes housed in the Gertrude Bell Archive.<sup>3</sup>

### **B. The Value of Bell's Fragmentary Record**

Even if Bell's direct textual references to the specific locality of Afrin prove minimal, her observations of the broader northern Syrian landscape, its ancient sites, and its diverse populations during her 1905 journey provide crucial contextual data for a region and a period that is otherwise not extensively documented in Western travel literature. Her accounts offer a pre-World War I snapshot of an area on the cusp of profound political and social change. Her descriptions of Ottoman administration, local security conditions, and inter-communal relations, however partial, contribute to a more nuanced understanding of this Ottoman periphery.

### **C. Bell's Legacy: A Complex Tapestry of Observation and Interpretation**

Gertrude Bell's legacy is multifaceted. She was a pioneering explorer, a dedicated archaeologist, a skilled linguist, and an influential political figure. Her meticulous record-keeping has bequeathed an invaluable archive that continues to serve researchers across multiple disciplines.<sup>7</sup> However, her work must also be understood within its historical and colonial context. Her perceptions were shaped by her background and the intellectual currents of her time, and her knowledge, however scholarly, became intertwined with the imperial project.

The true extent of Gertrude Bell's specific knowledge or detailed observations concerning the Afrin area and the Kurd Dagħ may remain somewhat elusive if not explicitly detailed in the more readily accessible portions of her vast archive. The search for such specific information is a painstaking process. However, the *methodology* employed in such an investigation—combining analysis of published works, systematic sifting of private papers and photographic records, and careful geographical and historical contextualization—is itself a valuable exercise in historical reconstruction. The process of searching for and interpreting Bell's potential records of this particular area contributes to a deeper appreciation of both her work and the challenges of writing history from fragmentary sources. Even if the definitive "answer" regarding her detailed knowledge of Afrin town remains nuanced, the journey through her archive illuminates the world she traversed.

Ultimately, Gertrude Bell's record, when carefully analyzed and placed alongside other contemporary sources—such as Ottoman administrative documents, accounts from any other travelers who may have ventured into that specific micro-region, and, where recoverable, local oral histories—can contribute significantly to a more polyphonic and comprehensive understanding of the region's past. This approach allows for a richer historical narrative that moves beyond a single, albeit highly articulate, colonial-era perspective, integrating her unique insights as one important thread in the complex tapestry of the history of Afrin and its surrounding environs.

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