

## Zipang – Mesopotamian story-tellers bring ancient tales to life in London

By: Karen Dabrowska

Zipang, a Mesopotamian story telling group has brought tales from ancient Iraq to London. A day out with a difference begins at the Information Desk of the Great Court in the British Museum where visitors collect a story clues Heritage Trail from the Zipang team. After completing the trail its time for a picnic lunch in one of the lovely nearby Bloomsbury Gardens or quaint cafes. The next event is in the Poetry Cafe in Covent Garden: a storytelling performance by the Zipang team and a workshop where the more adventurous can have a go at retelling a Mesopotamian story to soothing, inspiring music.

The story of the founder of Zipang, Fran Hazelton, is as fascinating as the tales of old. A

Londoner born and bred, Fran grew up hearing the sound of ship's fog-horns booming from the Port of London at the end of its 2,000 year history. This gave her a sense of the deep connection between her birthplace and people far, far away. Many a wet Sunday afternoon was filled with a visit to the nearby British Museum, keeping warm and being curious.

"One Christmas I found in my pillowcase a book entitled Man Must Measure, mainly about ancient Egypt but mentioning Mesopotamia. An illustrated version of Thousand and One Arabian Nights introduced me to Sinbad the Sailor", Fran recalls.

Catapulted from a comprehensive school to St Hugh's College, Oxford, to study politics, philosophy and economics she learned more about oil and also that 26 million Kurds lived without a homeland promised at the end of World War 1. When a Kurdish poet, Rafik Sabeer showed her a photo of his seven-year-old niece taken before she was hit in a bombing raid on her village by Saddam Hussein she was ready to campaign.

"I signed up with Liberation, formerly the Movement for Colonial Freedom headed by Lord Fenner Brockway and Stan Newens MP. There I met Iraqis who were setting up the Committee Against Repression and for Democratic Rights in Iraq (CARDRI). In 1979 I became honorary secretary and enrolled at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) for a part-time MA in Middle Eastern Studies".

CADRI campaigned throughout



**Fran Hazelton: Pioneering Mesopotamian story teller**

the 1980s and 1990s, chaired by Ann Clwyd MP, to expose the horrors of the Saddam Hussein regime. In 1992 Fran travelled to the Kurdish Autonomous Region, representing CARDRI as an observer at the first ever free and fair elections in Iraq, under the auspices of the UK Electoral Reform Society.

In 1992 – 93 she travelled back and forth to Iraqi Kurdistan. She was a guest at an Iraqi opposition conference and then led the first ever package tour to

the Kurdish Autonomous Region. The tour, organised by Ishtar Tours, included a visit to the Erbil qa'ala ior citadel one of the most important archaeological sites.

Inspired by her visit to the qa'ala, back in London, Fran buried herself in a search for Mesopotamian mythology. In the British Library she discovered academic translations of narrative texts originally written on clay tablets in the two long-dead Mesopotamian languages Sumerian and Akkadian. She

visited the British Museum again and again, buying books and enrolled in a course on the Myths and Rituals of the Ancient Near East, taught at SOAS by Dr Andrew George.

"As I gazed out of the SOAS window I thought how wonderful it would be to have a storytelling group retelling these stories beyond the circle of the academics who knew them. But first I had to study the art of oral storytelling. I found by chance Fiona Collins, a professional storyteller who had been retelling stories of the goddess Inana since 1991. She directed me to the Society for Storytelling (SfS) and a course in Wales to which I took Enuma Elish (the Babylonian creation myth) as my apprentice piece".

Dr Andrew George provided a pre-publication copy of his new translation of The Epic of Gilgamesh. From this Fran prepared a storytelling performance with professional storyteller June Peters.

## STORIES FROM ANCIENT IRAQ



Retold by Fran Handberg  
Introduction by Stephanie Dalley



**Enheduanna:  
the world's first poet**

In 1997 Fran and June made their debut at the Kufa Gallery in Bayswater, London. The Kufa (now closed) was where Dr Mohammed Makiya and his team kept alight the flame of Iraqi culture throughout the dark years of the Saddam Hussein regime.

As a trio of Mesopotamian storytellers, June, Fiona and Fran set about developing a wide repertoire of retold stories from the ancient translations of Sumerian and Akkadian literature. They performed at

many venues including the Kufa Gallery, Wolfson College Oxford, the Camden Ceilidh storytelling club and the British Museum.

To organise Zipang (a Mesopotamian storytelling group) events and apply for grants to fund them, an educational charity was founded in 2002 called the Enheduanna Society, after the world's first named poet and literary patron. Enheduanna lived in southern Iraq in 2300BC.

In 2004 a series of Zipang events was held in the October Gallery in London. Stories retold by the Zipang Mesopotamian storytellers were enhanced by Iraqi poetry and music, including the rhythms of Iraq from virtuoso percussionist Farid Zodan and Kurdish folk melodies played on the Celtic harp by Tara Jaff.

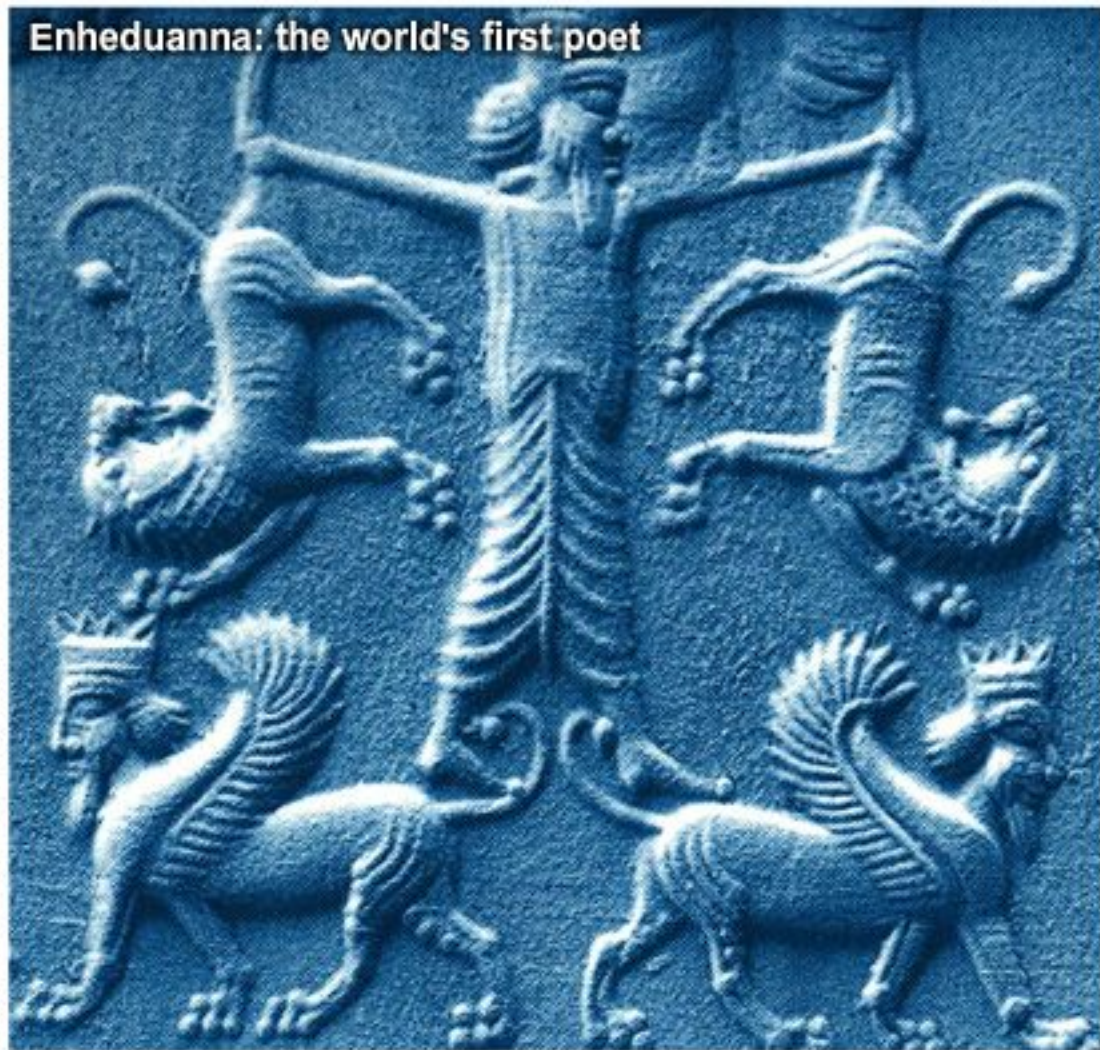
Tara and Fran had both been speakers at meetings of the Iraqi Women's League 25 years before in the CARDRI days and she frequently graced events at

the Kufa Gallery with her harp music and singing. Now, in the British Academy, Fran and Tara performed together a retelling of the Sumerian story Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird for the British School of Archaeology in Iraq (BSAI) now the British Institute

for the Study of Iraq.

An Arts Council grant funded the Zipang project 2006. This included storytelling performances of Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird and The Epic of Gilgamesh at the International festival of Middle Eastern Peace

### **Enheduanna: the world's first poet**



and Spirituality in Edinburgh, the Arabic Community Festival in West London, the Kurdish Cultural Centre in South London and the Kufa Gallery days before it finally closed. Tara sang songs in Sumerian and Akkadian which she put to music from texts provided by Dr Elanor Robson and Dr Fran Reynolds of Oxford University.

The Enheduanna Society published *Stories from Ancient Iraq* retold by Fran Hazelton

with an introduction by Dr Stephanie Dalley. Professor Farouk al-Rawi, an expert on Mesopotamian languages and literature, liked the book: "Scholars usually describe Mesopotamian literature as a skeleton created by the Sumerians", he said. "The Babylonians and Assyrians covered that skeleton with flesh, Fran Hazelton has given it life and dressed it to suit modern readers".