



Three Anniversaries for London's Mesopotamian Story Telling Group

Fran Hazelton... began telling Mesopotamian stories 15 years ago

By Karen Dabrowska

(The Tripoli Post UK Correspondent)

Zipang, a London Mesopotamian story telling group, recently celebrated three anniversaries at London University's Brunei Gallery, they being, according to Fran Hazelton, 15 years of Zipang story telling, ten years of the Enheduanna Society and three years of the Mesopotamia story telling project.

Fran Hazelton, a former political activist and secretary of the Committee Against Repression and for Democratic Rights in Iraq, is the one who introduced the stories of ancient Iraq to 21st century audiences. He began telling Mesopotamian stories 15 years ago.

Hazelton, who began telling Mesopotamian stories 15 years ago, explained that "Zipang is the word for breath in the Mesopotamian language. We are breathing life into the long lost stories of Mesopotamia."

She set up the Enheduanna Society, a registered educational charity, in 2002 to popularise the literature of Ancient Iraq (Mesopotamia) through the art of oral storytelling. Enheduanna lived in Mesopotamia in about 2300 BCE, and was the world's first named poet.

The three-year Discover Mesopotamia through Storytelling project was organised by the Enheduanna Society and funded mainly by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Mesopotamian story telling workshops were held in the Poetry Cafe in Covent

Garden and the Mesopotamian galleries at the British Museum made a heritage trail possible.

After describing Zipang's activities Hazelton told the story of the poor man of Nippur an Akkadian tale dating from around 1500BC:

There was a man, a citizen of Nippur, destitute and poor, Gimil-Ninurta was his name, an unhappy man, In his city, Nippur, he lived, working hard, but Had not the silver befitting his class, Had not the gold befitting people (of his stature). His storage bins lacked pure grain, His insides burned, craving food, and His face was unhappy, craving meat and first-class beer.

Gimil-Ninurta sold his garments to buy a goat but he could not hold a feast as his friends would be furious there was no beer.

He presented the goat to the mayor. This was interpreted as a bribe and Gimil-Ninurta was given only a mug of third-class beer and the leavings of the meal before being thrown out. Through the medium of the gatekeeper he vowed to avenge his mistreatment three times over but when the mayor heard this he laughed.



Fran Hazelton, (right) with Tara Jaff (centre) and June Peters

Gimil-Ninurta hired a chariot and robe from the king. Returning to the mayor's house with a locked chest containing two birds he presented himself as a royal courier conveying gold to the temple of Enlil. Arising in the night and opening the chest to release the birds, he beat the mayor for the purported theft and was compensated with two minas of red gold.

Gimil-Ninurta called upon the mayor again disguised as an itinerant physician come to treat his wounds.

Claiming that his medication was only effective in the darkness, he lured the mayor into a private room, bound his hands and feet and beat him once more.

Continued on page 10



Return of Inanna Art inspired by Mesopotamian mythology



The oldest Mesopotamian story in Sumerian

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Continued from page 16

The mayor instructed his staff to watch for his persecutor but Gimil-Ninurta hired an accomplice to identify himself as 'the man with the goat' at the mayor's gate and drew them out. He hid under a bridge near the mayor's house and beat the mayor nigh to death while he was alone.

On display were the fruits of 15 years of Zipang's activities: a teacher's pack about Mesopotamia to enable teachers to chose for their world history studies not Egypt or the Aztecs but ancient Sumer, a Zipang CD of three Sumerian stories, two books published by the Enheduanna Societ: *Stories from Ancient Iraq* and the latest publication *Three Kings of Warka* both by Fran Hazelton.

Discover Mesopotamia through storytelling heritage trial packs were also available.

Flyers described three new project proposals: an Enheduanna Poetry Festival, a Mesopotamian Storytellers' Award and *Gilgamesh Today*,

a project that will have as its leaders and participants people aged 11 to 25 who are keen to communicate the world heritage importance of ancient Iraq to others of their generation.

The life story of Fran Hazelton is as varied and interesting as ancient myths she retells with never waning enthusiasm and vigour even though she suffers from multiple sclerosis.

A Londoner 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

STORIES FROM ANCIENT IRAQ

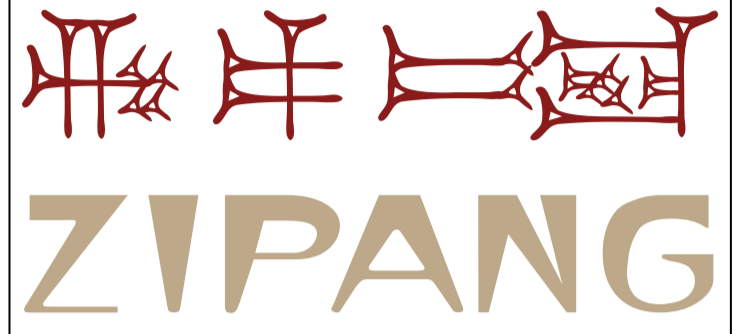


Retold by Fran Hazelton
Introduction by Stephanie Dalley

afternoon was filled with a visit to the 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 about 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. 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."

CARDRI campaigned throughout 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.

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 that included a visit to the Erbil citadel one of the world's most important archaeological sites.

Inspired by the citadel Fran buried herself in a search for Mesopotamian mythology. In the British Library she discovered translations of narrative texts originally written on clay tablets in the 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 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 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 a new translation of the Epic of Gilgamesh. From this Fran prepared a storytelling performance with professional storyteller June Peters.

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 Saddam Hussein's regime.

As a trio of Mesopotamian storytellers, June, Fiona and Fran set about developing a wide repertoire of retold stories. To organise Zipang (a Mesopotamian storytelling group) events and apply for grants to fund them, an educational charity, the Enheduanna Society, was founded in 2002.

In 2004 a series of Zipang events was held in the October Gallery in London. Stories retold by Zipang 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.

Fran has never looked back on her reincarnation from a political activist to a Mesopotamian storyteller and the Enheduanna Society is growing from strength to strength as the three anniversaries celebrated this month show.

It has published two books by Fran retelling the stories of ancient Iraq. In a tribute to Fran Professor Farouk Al-Rawi, an expert on Mesopotamian languages said: "Scholars usually describe Mesopotamian literature as a skeleton created by the Sumerians.

The Babylonians and Assyrians covered that skeleton with flesh. Fran Hazelton has given it life and dressed it to suit modern readers."