

Famous women from ancient times are few and far between. Who would have guessed, then, that the world's first "non-anonymous" author would be a woman? Read on and meet the most famous ancient woman writer you never heard of.

Enheduana of Sumer

from *Outrageous Women of Ancient Times*

by VICKI LEÓN

You might call Enheduana one of history's first bookworms. Perhaps she brought books to the dinner table. If so, they looked like small clay pillows, not paperbacks. In her day, almost 4,300 years ago, "books" were written on soft clay with a pointed tool called a stylus. It was a big deal, learning to read back then. Enheduana not only read well, she wrote well. In fact, she became the world's first bestselling author as well as the most famous poet from the ancient land of Sumer.

Enheduana, her twin brothers Rimush and Manishtusu, and her father Sargon lived in a spanking-new big palace, surrounded by the city-state of Akkad in Sumer (located about where Baghdad is today). King Sargon, an ambitious boy from a family of Mesopotamian farmers, began his rise to the top as a humble cupbearer for the king of Kish, a nearby city-state. No one knows how he managed to grab the throne for himself, but he did. Soon he expanded his rule over Kish and Akkad and made them important cities of Sumer, a flat and fertile crescent of land between two great

BIOGRAPHY

LANGUAGE ARTS ●

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Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

▲ King Sargon established a great Akkadian empire.

You Need to Know...

Sargon was considered the greatest of all the Akkadian kings. He ruled from 2334 to 2279 B.C. and had twin sons and a daughter, Enheduana (en·hā'dōō·ä'nə). As the daughter of a powerful king, Enheduana learned to write at a time when only a few people—mostly men—had this ability. Perhaps Enheduana was proud of her writings, or perhaps she felt she had the right to include her name because of her status as a high priestess. Whatever the reason, Enheduana was the first person to use her own name in her writings. She thus became the first known author in the entire history of literature.

crescent (kres'ənt): a shape like the moon just before or just after a new moon.

sacred (sā'krid): holy.

sacrifices (sak'rə-fīz'iz): something precious, such as animal or human lives, offered to a god.

... rivers in what is now Iraq. (In Enheduana's day, "countries" as we know them didn't really exist yet—instead, independent cities like Akkad, Kish, and Ur fought to control larger regions of land. Political power and political boundaries changed hands all the time.)

... Naturally, Sargon¹ expected Enheduana's kid brothers to follow in his footsteps as kings of Sumer and Akkad one day. Unfortunately, the twins had the yen² to be kings, but not the talent.

... Enheduana, on the other hand, soon showed that she had talent and drive to spare. When she became a teenager, her dad thought she was ready for grownup responsibility. He appointed her to be the high priestess to Nanna, the important moon-god of Sumer.

... To perform her duties as high priestess, Enheduana had to leave her hometown of Akkad and move south to Ur, one of the most sacred cities in Sumer. Ur sat near the Persian Gulf, its houses and buildings clustered around a tall ziggurat, a temple that looked like a pyramid with steps. Each of the ziggurat's seven stories was painted a different color. The top story was painted blue. Enheduana used the room at the very top, nearest the heavens.

... Enheduana's people believed in many gods and goddesses. Only through the priestess's hard work would the higher powers smile on the land and keep the crops, animals, and people well and prosperous. Wearing her special cap, carrying a mace,³ and dressed in a long embroidered gown with rows of ruffles, Enheduana offered prayers and carried out rituals throughout the year. On the altars at the top of the ziggurat, she made animal sacrifices. To please the gods and goddesses, she also burned incense and other perfumed resins,⁴ sending the sweet-smelling smoke through the clear blue skies of

1. **Sargon** (sär'gän): considered the greatest of the Akkadian kings; legend says soon after he was born, he was put in a basket on the Euphrates River and raised by a gardener who found him. As a young man, Sargon overthrew the king and seized power.

2. **yen** (yen): a desire or longing.

3. **mace** (mäs): an ornamental staff or scepter.

4. **resins** (rez'ənz): sticky gums given off by certain plants.

Sumer. (Our word “perfume” actually means “through smoke.”)

Her most important ritual duty was the annual New Year celebration each spring. (Early religions often celebrated the new year in the spring because people wanted to encourage the growth of crops.) The ceremony retold the story of a sacred marriage between a shepherd named Dumuzi and the moon-goddess Inanna. Inside her blue room high in the ziggurat, Enheduana as the goddess-bride and one of the reigning kings or high priests would reenact the marriage of a goddess and a human each year, to keep the gods happy.

Besides her spiritual duties as high priestess, a position she kept for nearly twenty-five years, Enheduana channeled much of her religious feeling into her writing. She wrote a set of forty-two poems or hymns to the temples of Sumer and Akkad. Although a priestess of the moon-god originally, Enheduana began to identify more with the moon-goddess Inanna. She wrote a great cycle of poetry to her, which was probably sung and performed,

called the Exaltation of Inanna. Thanks to her influence, Inanna (later called Ishtar) gradually became the supreme being in the land of Sumer.

Enheduana’s poems were very popular in her day and long after. Because she wrote on clay tablets, which were much more durable than paper, archaeologists have found over fifty tablets with the same poem on them. For Enheduana’s time, this



David Lees/CORBIS

▲ These statues were placed in temples to serve as permanent worshipers. ■ **How would you describe their appearance, and why do you think the sculptor created the statues to look this way?**

Life in River City

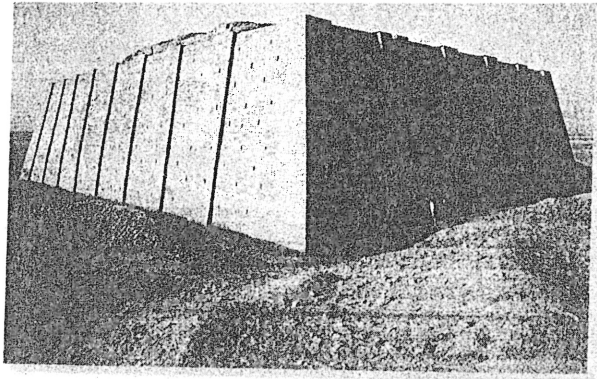
If you were born in Mesopotamia, you belonged to one of three classes: landowner, freeman (who did not own land), or slave. Slaves occupied the lowest level of society. They were often people who had been captured in wars, or citizens who had fallen into debt. Even if you were a slave, however, there was a possibility that you could one day own a business and property and even buy your freedom.

If you were a married woman, your husband could rent or sell you and your children into slavery to pay off debts. Even so, you were free to own your own land or a business. You also had the right to divorce a cruel husband.

Children were expected to care for their elderly parents. If you were worried about security in your later years, you could always adopt more children—just to be sure!

supreme (sə-prēm’): greatest or highest in power or authority.

Dean Conger/CORBIS



▲ The ziggurat was the most important structure in Mesopotamian cities. The ziggurat at Ur (shown above) is the most preserved of all Mesopotamian ziggurats and has been partially restored.

composing (kəm·pōz'īn): creating or producing, usually a musical or literary work.

was like going platinum or making the bestseller list.

Enheduana's writings tell us much about herself, the Sumerian religion, and even politics. For instance, she wrote an exciting account about her father. At one point, the city-states that Sargon had taken united in revolt against him. They besieged⁵ the city of Akkad and exiled the goddess Inanna from her temples. Sargon finally broke the siege, beat the rebels, and made them recognize the goddess Inanna as all-powerful.

Enheduana kept on composing poetry and taking care of her religious responsibilities, even after her father died. Her brother Rimush, the older twin, ruled first. Then Manishtusu (named "who is with him?" by the surprised midwife who delivered the babies) took over. Both brothers loved bloodshed; both were killed in turn by palace enemies who hated them. Then a nephew of Enheduana's came into power. In spite of her long experience, popularity, and royal background, Enheduana lost her priestess post. Her nephew kicked her out, possibly exiling her to the desert. Then he installed his own daughter as high priestess.

But Enheduana ended up having the last laugh. And the last word, literally. No one remembers her nasty nephew King Naram-Sin today. Enheduana, however, has become a famous first: she is the very earliest author, male or female, to be known by name. Her poems, written around 2300 B.C., are the first creations anywhere in the world credited to an individual person. A verse from one of them shows her spirit:

*The first lady of the throne room
has accepted Enheduana's song.
Inanna loves her again.*

*The day was good for Enheduana, for she was dressed
in jewels.*

5. **besieged** (bē·sējd'): tried to capture by surrounding and isolating.

*She was dressed in womanly beauty.
Like the moon's first rays over the horizon,
how luxuriously she was dressed!*

*When Nanna, Inanna's father, made his entrance
the palace blessed Inanna's mother Ningal.*

From the doorsill of heaven came the word: "Welcome!"

There is a proverb from Enheduana's day, written in a dialect used by women only, called Emesal. It says: "My mouth makes me comparable with men." That proud statement, written by an unknown woman, could have come from the smiling lips of Enheduana herself.

✓ Reading Check

1. What did books look like during the time that Enheduana was writing? How were these books written?
2. Where did Enheduana and her family live? What did her father do?
3. What was Enheduana's job? List three of her duties. How did she lose her job?
4. The author says that Enheduana's poems were so popular that they were like bestsellers today. What evidence does she use to support this claim?
5. Enheduana's writings are hymns of praise, but they also tell us about the times she lived in. Describe one "current event" that Enheduana wrote about.

MEET THE *Writer*

Vicki León (1942–) is a writer, editor, researcher, and photographer. She has written books for both children and adults. León's interest in historical women has led her to research, rediscover, and write about forgotten women of the past.

Ringling in the New Year

The New Year was a very important celebration for the ancient Mesopotamians—but they didn't stand around singing "Auld Lang Syne" and setting off fireworks. The Mesopotamians believed that each New Year the gods decided peoples' fate for the coming year. During the eleven-day New Year's festival, ordinary people, as well as priests and priestesses, offered food and incense to the gods. A sheep was killed in a special ceremony. The people believed that the sheep absorbed the evil of the old year. When the dead sheep was thrown into the river, all the evil floated away with it.

