

Journey of the Wheel



by Veena Prasad

A historic yarn starring an ancient explorer, a clever Mesopotamian boy and his extraordinary toy

The year was 2500 BCE in the city of Kish in old Mesopotamia¹. Young Zimri was watching his father, Assur, gather red clay from the bank of the Euphrates. He would then heap the moist clay on a wheel lying flat on the ground and spin it, as his hands shaped a flawless pot. Zimri never tired of watching this magical transformation. The last few months had been extremely busy for Assur, as the priests from the Temple of Inanna had ordered huge numbers of pots and small statues. And so Zimri decided to wait before asking his father to make him a toy.

He ruefully looked at the last toy his father had made for him. It was a small clay goat whose legs were missing. It did have legs when it was new, but after bravely fighting many imaginary battles for Zimri, they had snapped off.

Zimri wandered off to find his uncle Luga. Luga was an apprentice clay worker. Not as skilled as his brother Assur, he hadn't been commissioned to make artefacts for the

temple. He was a good brickmaker though, and anyone who was building a house in Kish approached him first.

"Uncle Luga! Can you make a toy for me?" Zimri called out.

"What happened to your goat?"

Zimri showed him the remains.

Luga laughed. "I'll make another one for you when I have some time. Meanwhile, make yourself useful Zimri! I have a guest coming all the way from Uruk. Help me clean up the place!" Luga lived in a small brick house with a large yard which doubled up as his workshop. This meant it was always messy.

"Why am I always around when he wants to clean up?" mumbled Zimri, as he picked up a stray brick and stacked it on a half-standing wall of bricks. He stopped mid-stride



¹Mesopotamia, or *The Land Between Two Rivers*, is situated between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris in present-day Iraq. An early civilisation thrived here more six thousand years ago.



to wonder, “Or does he think of cleaning it only when I’m around?!”

When Luga’s guest arrived, the yard was in a fairly tolerable state. It might have been a little more presentable had Zimri not stumbled onto a curious-looking object halfway through his cleaning, and spent the rest of the afternoon playing with it. He quickly hid it inside his tunic and greeted Yahurum, the famous explorer from Uruk. He was excited to see him, just as every citizen in Kish was. Yahurum was both a trader and explorer who travelled to faraway lands on camelback and by sea and brought back exquisite treasures that no one could dream up.

“What’s that hidden in your tunic, young Zimri?” were Yahurum’s first words of greeting.

“Doesn’t miss a trick, that man,” grumbled Zimri, as he reluctantly extracted a smooth clay disc from inside his tunic. Yahurum’s face was nonchalant, but his eyes narrowed. A shrewd trader, he had trained himself not to show too much interest in anything, lest its price shoot up. Casually, he placed the disc in his



palm and turned it over.

“You can have two figs for this,” he said flatly.

But Zimri had caught the glint in the trader’s eyes and wasn’t fooled by his indifference.

“Add a clay tablet, and it’s yours,” the little boy proposed.

“Done!” boomed Yahurum.

Many moons later...

It was that time of the year again. Preparations for the grand festivities at the Temple of Inanna had begun. It was also time for

Yahurum’s yearly visit. Most excited of all was the explorer himself, as he had just returned from distant Turkey, bringing back a novelty so alluring that it would thrill the people of Kish. He was mentally calculating his profits when Luga, trailed by Zimri, welcomed him into the yard. “I come this time from the wondrous land of Anatolia²,” began Yahurum. He rambled on about the various monuments they were building and their shiny copper trinkets.

The priests of the Temple of

²Present-day Turkey



Inanna who had gathered at Luga's house wore polite expressions, but rolled their eyes when Yahurum implied that the Temple of Artemis in Anatolia was the grandest he had seen.

"Do you know what makes it so great?" he continued. "Is it the 10,000 workers? Perhaps. Their mastery with bronze? Doubtlessly. The expert craftsmen? Obviously. But they have something else that no one else has..." He paused theatrically to see if anyone could take a guess, but his audience remained impassive.

"A tool! One which many of you have seen and used, but never so ingeniously as the Anatolians," he said,

eyeing Zimri's father Assur, who was frowning in a corner of the yard.

The air grew thick with hostility as Yahurum concluded, "It's a potter's wheel, except they use them in pairs – and standing upright! With this contraption,

Historic Bytes

Archaeologists have found remains of ancient wheels in Mesopotamia. These finds suggest that wheels were first used for pottery sometime during 3000 BCE, and for transport during 2000 BCE. The revolutionary idea travelled across Eurasia quickly – to India, China, Egypt, Turkey, and eventually to the rest of Europe.

they can carry heavy objects and travel across distances without tiring!"

"Like this?" Zimri walked past, pulling a string to which a clay tablet carrying his old, broken toy goat was attached. Fixed on either side of the tablet, were small potter's wheels standing upright! "Or like this?" asked Luga, pulling a wagon filled with a dozen bricks.

Yahurum stared, open-mouthed.

"What is the one thing that moves faster than a trader?" he asked with a cocked eyebrow.

"A good idea!" quipped Zimri with a cheeky grin. ■