

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SYMBOLS OF GODS IN THE MESOPOTAMIAN CYLINDER SEALS \*

BY.

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Cylinder seals may be studied from three points of view:

- 1 Interpretation
- 2 Art (form)
- 3 Chronology

1 *Interpretation*: Iconography is the central point of the present studies in the field of Near-Eastern archaeology; this is accepted by all students in this field. For these studies, a single approach, which combines the methods of Philology and Archaeology, is necessary <sup>1</sup>.

2 *Art (form)*: To study the cylinder seals from the point of view of art as A. Moortgat, <sup>2</sup> in particular, is doing, is to study the outer forms of the works of art and through this to try to penetrate into the general culture which they represent. Also, F. Matz <sup>3</sup>, starting from the seals and taking into consideration other objects of art and basing his studies on outer forms, believes that it is possible to bring out the principles of historical periods.

3 *Chronology*: If we take into consideration the third point in studying cylinder seals, we must first point out that chronology cannot stand alone as the final goal. It is necessary that abstract chronology be tied in with historical events. Sometimes a study limited to external indices can produce chronological data, but this is not always possible. Therefore, in order to deserve to be called historical, our work must take into consideration the inner causes as well

\* I am indebted to Prof. Dr. S. Rogers for corrections of the language.

<sup>1</sup> Mebrure Tosun, Mesopotamya Silindir Mühürlerinin Prophylactique Fonksiyonu ve Üzerlerindeki Yazıların Ehemmiyeti. Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi, Cilt X, 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> A. Moortgat, Die Bildende Kunst des Alten Orients und die Bergvölker, Berlin, 1932.

<sup>3</sup> F. Matz, Die Frühkretischen Siegel, Berlin, 1928.

as the outer indices. When we study a culture, we perceive developments, advances, spurts, and retrogressions. The same appearances seen in the art are not always paralleled by historical events. A. Moortgat, in all his works on Mesopotamian Art, has tried to correlate artistic evolution with historic developments, but he has not always been completely successful. If we want to find a relationship between the appearances in the art and the historical events, it is absolutely necessary to tie in the objects of art directly with the literature. We are insisting that the philological sources necessary for the interpretation of the archaeological objects must belong to the same period. I will explain in another article the possible consequences in attempting to relate documents and art objects which are temporally disparate.

I have pointed out the three main ways of studying cylinder seals, and now I wish to elaborate on the first point:

*Interpretation* - To give meaning to what we see.

What do we see on the Mesopotamian cylinder seals; how can we explain them; and when we do explain them, what means do we apply? First of all, we have to know the functions of the cylinder seals; and according to these, we have to visualize the subjects to which the seals refer. In one of our previous articles <sup>4</sup> we have discussed the different functions of the cylinder seals, and pointed out as the last and the most important function, the prophylactic function and the amulet character of the seals.

The human being is in need of coming into contact with his god and perhaps the only way to do this is through prayer. Prayer is the foundation of the religion of the ancient people of Mesopotamia. The human being expresses his wishes, his needs, and his fears to his god and procures help and protection from him. The gods hear prayers; and if they find them deserving, they fulfill them.

The statues of the gods were kept in the temples and were worshipped just as if they were the gods themselves. Because of the polytheistic nature of religions, it was necessary to show each god's field of dominance. This belief is very clearly seen in the images of their

<sup>4</sup> Mebrure Tosun, Mesopotamya Silindir Mühürlerinin Prophylactique Fonksiyonu ve Üzerlerindeki Yazıların Ehemmiyeti. D. T. C. F. Dergisi Cilt X, 1-2.

gods. In order to convey the idea of each god, the gods were distinguished by their attire and their symbols. The symbols of the gods were worshipped as devoutly as were the gods themselves. They were connected directly with them or their cults, which represent them directly, and are very numerous in the religion of the old Mesopotamian peoples. These symbols are in the forms of natural animals such as lions, bulls, scorpions, serpents, etc., or mythological animals, such as dragons.<sup>5</sup>

Different objects such as weapons, agricultural implements, attire, etc. could also be the symbols of gods. They were kept in temples just as the simulacra of the gods themselves, and were worshipped in the same manner.

These symbols present in the religion of the ancient Mesopotamian people, appeared also in their art. We are still not able to understand and interpret all the symbols of gods even with all the research done up to the present time.

We have already mentioned above the prophylactic function of the cylinder seals. The Ancient Mesopotamian carried his seal tied to his wrist or hanging about his neck but always on his person. He engraved on his seal the picture of his god, his symbols or the name of his god or some magic figures. He did not have only religious subjects on his seal, but he sometimes had entirely profane figures and even figures for filling blank spaces

In this article on the Mesopotamian Cylinder Seals, we are going to discuss the following:

A. Problems met through the study of symbols of gods on the Mesopotamian Cylinder seals.

B. Criticism of literature which has been written on this subject.

C. Contributions which we can make to this subject,

**A. Problems met through the study of symbols of gods on the**

**Mesopotamian Cylinder seals:** Description must precede interpretation. The first condition for this is, of course, to see well and

<sup>5</sup> Unger, *Mischwesen*, *Reallexikon der Vorgeschichte*, VIII, S. 195-216, Lev. 61-70.

correctly. Even in these simple steps, we can make mistakes. The problems introduced by C. Robert on the hermeneutic of the classical archaeology<sup>6</sup> may be applied to the Mesopotamian archaeology also. According to C. Robert interpretation involves two functions: 1. To name the figures, and 2. To recognize what is expressed through these figures. According to the character of the object of art that is going to be studied, we can begin working with either of these functions; and as I mentioned above, when we are interpreting the objects of art, we have to profit from the written documents as much as possible and we are obliged to find relationships between these documents and the objects of art.

When we are making our interpretations, there are many points which we must consider. First of all, we have to make a clear separation between "type" and "individuum". For example, a hunter or a blacksmith are types; and they can be very easily recognized, provided the weapons and implements of trade are the same as we use today. We can talk about a type of god or a type of human being; and as long as these are not distinguished by an individual emblem, they remain types. For example, a worshipper type (Fig. 1) or a type of god (distinguished only by a horned crown). These are not specific individuals but types. We recognize them all very easily. The scenes describing the activities of these types are called "genre" scenes. How are we to recognize a god, Šamaš or Ninurta? Only by knowing the mythology can we make precise identifications and suggest possible candidates for an *individuum*.

After distinguishing between "type" and "individuum" then we must decide if the figure is a profane one, (Fig. 2) or a divinity. There remains to be recognized the identity of the special divinity represented. What means did the ancient Mesopotamians apply to distinguish a special god? The first thing that comes to our minds is to write the name of the god beside the picture. This was done in the ancient Greek and Hittite art; but in the ancient Mesopotamian art, they seldom applied this simple rule. On the kudurru's (boundary stones), only when symbols are considered, very seldom does writing appear to show to whom the symbol belongs. (fig. 3) On other objects of art one almost never sees such a thing. In one

<sup>6</sup> C. Robert, *Archaeologische Hermeneutik*, Berlin, 1919.

of our previous articles <sup>7</sup> we have discussed how far the legends can be helpful in interpreting the figures,

The second means of distinguishing a god is through attire and symbols. <sup>8</sup> We must be very careful to distinguish between the symbols in the hands or beside the god and the independent symbols. There is a difficulty which we may encounter. The gods did not always carry the same symbol in every period. Another point is that new gods appeared from time to time and old ones lost their position and others disappeared. In studying the development of symbols and figures, these points must be taken into consideration and the following must be made clear: When did the systems of gods appear; which gods were present when, and which disappeared afterwards; which Gods carried which symbols at which times? For example, in the Old Babylonian Period the Warrior Goddess, Ištar (fig. 4) carried the šun-tabba, <sup>9</sup> known in archaeology as the caduceus, and also the arrows protruding from the quiver behind her and pointing out from her shoulders. However, in a previous period, the Akkadian Period, she carries the date panicle (fig. 5) instead of the šun-tabba. In the Old Babylonian period and the following periods we do not see the goddess with the date panicle.

Another example, the Warrior God, Ningirsu, appears in the Gudea period just like Ninurta, a hero God; <sup>10</sup> but in the old

<sup>7</sup> Mebrure Tosun, Mesopotamya Silindir Mühürlerinin Prophylactique Fonksiyonu... D. T. C. F. Dergisi Cilt X, 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> The Sumerian word for the symbol is ŠU-NER and the Akkadian pronunciation is *šwinnu* (Deimel 354, 286. Wahrzeichen, Gottersymbol, Emblem). For the reading of this word confer: Landsberger, *Orientalische Literatur Zeitung* (1912) S. 150. Douglas van Buren has gathered the references in her book about *Symbols of The Gods*, pg. 1, footnote 4.

<sup>9</sup> For the weapons of Ištar see: M. Tosun, An Old Babylonian Cylinder Seal found in Boğazköy D. T. C. F. Dergisi, Cilt XII, 3-4, S. 220-221.

<sup>10</sup> The Warrior God type Ninurta of the periods of Gudea and III. UR is not represented in archaeology. We recognize the Ninurta of these periods from the literature and canonic texts of the Gudea Period According to these texts šár-ur and šár-gaz are found among the weapons of Ninurta. These are maces with the heads of a wild bird and a wild animal. In comparing Gudea, Zyl. A 25, 24 ff. and C T 15, 42, we see that all the symbols of Ninurta have passed to Ningirsu. In the Gudea Zyl the hunting and triumph trophies of Ningirsu are enumerated. In CT 15, 42, the same list of trophies with a variant appear as Ninurta's trophies.

Babyloniaian and specially in the Kassite period, Ningirsu appears entirely as an agricultural god with a plow in his hand as his symbol. Ninurta still remains as a warrior god, but in the Akkadian Period neither Ninurta nor Ningirsu carry the symbol of plow. However, the plow has been symbol of the God, Enlil, also. Therefore, in the Akkadian Period, to the god with the symbol of plow we can give neither the name of Ningirsu nor Ninurta. We cannot answer these questions until the history and the development of the symbols and the biography of every archaeological figure is studied.

### B. Criticism of the literature about the symbols of gods :

Many scholars studied the appearance of the symbols of gods in art, specially the symbols on kudurru's (boundary stones), (fig. 5) Scholars as Zimmerm (11) Steinmetzer(12), Frank(13), Unger(14), and Th. Dangin(15) have worked on them. The symbols of gods do not only appear on such stones, but on glyptic objects also which are just as important as the boundary stones. Many scholars studied these symbols on the glyptic objects. They have tried to describe, classify, and to interpret them. Among these the work of W. H. Ward, published in 1910<sup>16</sup> is one of the most important reference books on this subject.

Because of the identification of a few symbols of some archaeological figures, H. Prinz's work<sup>17</sup> published in 1915, has not yet lost its importance.

H. H. von der Osten published in 1934 and 1936 description of two collections belonging to a Mr. Newell<sup>18</sup> and Mrs. Agnes

<sup>11</sup> H. Zimmerm, Die Göttersymbole des Nazimaruttaş Kudurru, Leipziger Semitische Studien, 11 2, 33-44.

<sup>12</sup> F. X. Steinmetzer, Die Babylonischen Kudurru (Grenzeteine) als Urkunden (Paderborn 1922).

<sup>13</sup> K. Frank, Bilder und Symbole, Leipziger Semitischen Studien, 11, 2.

<sup>14</sup> E. Unger, Göttersymbole, Reallexikon für Vorgeschichte IV. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Thureau Dangin, Un Acte de Donation de Marduk-Zakir-Şumi, Revue d'Assyriology S. 134 ff.

<sup>16</sup> W. H. Ward; The Seal Cylinder Seals of Western Asia, Washington, D. C. 1910.

<sup>17</sup> H. Prinz, Altorientalische Symbolik, Berlin 1915.

<sup>18</sup> H. H. von der Osten, The Ancient Oriental Seals in the Collection of Mr. Edward T. Newell (The Oriental Institute Publications XXII, Chicago, 1934).

Brett.<sup>19</sup> He classified the attire of gods and the cult objects, as well as the symbols of gods. In the publication of these catalogues von der Osten has gone no further than describing the symbols. That is, no interpretation was attempted.

With the studies of the archaeologist, E. Douglas van Buren, the works on this field enter a new era. In the works of this archaeologist, all the material, published or unpublished, belonging to the subject she is treating, is introduced in a systematic way. Besides this, the author has succeeded in putting the material in a chronological order with the help of the new excavations which previous scholars did not have the opportunity of doing. Van Buren tries to give mythological meanings to the types and motifs she is working on with the help of the cuneiform texts, when a translation is provided. In other words, she tries in her studies in this field to go beyond description and tries to make interpretations. In a monography about *The Flowing Vase and God with Streams* (Berlin, 1933), she has studied the type of water god Ea, very extensively; and in another monography about the god, Ningišzida,<sup>20</sup> she recognized the god with precision. In an article about Religious Rites and Ceremonies in Uruk, IV - III<sup>21</sup> in speaking about the horned crown, the symbol of divinity, she has succeeded in changing the belief among the scholars up to that time. Van Buren has written a book specially on the symbols of gods<sup>22</sup> She has compiled all the references in cuneiform texts about the Akkadian word *šurinu* meaning symbol. She divides the symbols into different classes. From our point of view, it is unfortunate that she has treated her references uncritically.

We have reviewed the most important literature which directly concerns our subject. We thought it useless to take into consideration the works which are no more than catalogues. Even though they deal with the subject of glyptic art of the Hittites, we think it of

<sup>19</sup> H. H. von der Osten, *Ancient Oriental Seals in the Collection of Mrs. Agnes Baldwin Brett* (OIP XXXVII), Chicago, 1936.

<sup>20</sup> D. van Buren, *The God Ningizzida*, Iraq I S. 60-89.

<sup>21</sup> D. van Buren, *Religious Rites and Rituals in Uruk IV-III*, *Archiv für Orientforschung* XIII.

<sup>22</sup> D. van Buren, *Symbols of the Gods in Mesopotamian Art*, Roma 1945.

importance to name such scholars as apply the same method of study. Also they belong to the study of the Near-Eastern cultures. I shall only name the Hittitologists, Von Brandenstein, H. Guterback, and Sedat Alp, who are working with a combined method which is the method of philology and archeology. H. Bossert is applying the same combined method not only to Hittite material but also to the studies of other Near-Eastern cultures.

### **Contributions which we can make to this subject**

After reviewing the points of views concerning the study of significance of the symbols of gods seen on the cylinder seals, we want to summarize our contributions under three headings.

The symbols of gods appear in three main fields:

1 **Cult** : The symbols of cult are symbols which are kept in the temples for different uses, such as,

A. Worship;

B. Oath (the taking of oaths);

C. *Burru*.

A — The center of gravity in the life of the ancient Mesopotamian people was religion. Religion was based on worship. The symbols of gods were worshipped just as earnestly as the gods themselves. They were kept in the temples just as the statues of the gods. The ritual texts describing the religious ceremonies tell us how these symbols were used in these ceremonies.

B — Oaths were taken with certain kinds of ceremonies in front of the statues of gods and also by the symbols of the gods. Thus the temples had a great influence upon the legal life of the ancient Mesopotamian people. Upon the subjects of oath, Samuel Mercer has written a doctoral thesis. <sup>22a</sup> I am unable to say more about this because I do not have access to the book at the present time.

A. Walther, in his article about *das Altbabylonische Gerichtswesen*, <sup>23</sup> has treated the same subject and has collected all the referen-

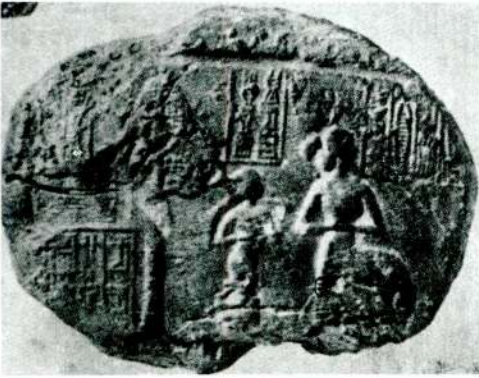
<sup>22a</sup> D. Von Buren,, Symbols of the Gods in Mesopotamian Art, P. 12, food. note 1.

<sup>23</sup> A. Walter, *das Altbabylonische Gerichtswesen*, Leipziger Semitische Studien VI, 4-6, Der Eid, S. 191 ff.

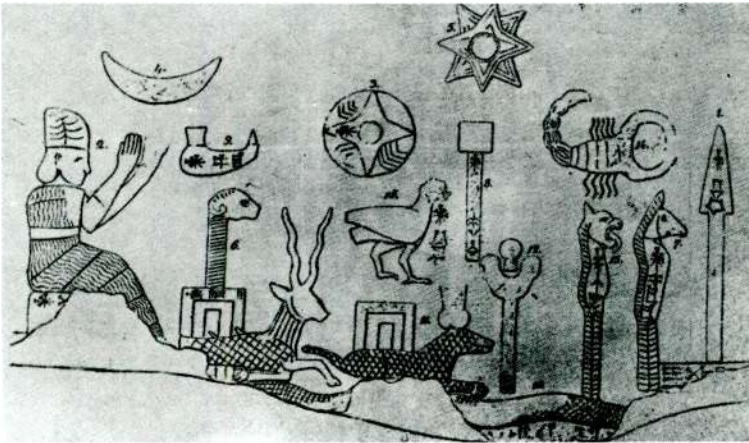




← Res. 1



← Res. 2



Res. 3



Res. 4



Res. 5



Res. 8



Res. 6

*M. Tosun*



Res. 7

ces in the cuneiform texts. Van Buren in the introduction of her book on *Symbols of Gods*, page 7, briefly mentions the use of the symbols in the temples of Gods for oath; and has collected the corresponding references.

C — The activity of *burru* is to bring the symbol of god to a particular spot in question to solve the problem or to find a lost object<sup>24</sup>. The word *burru* is from the root *buaru* which means "to be clear"<sup>25</sup>.

## II. Symbols of Šimtu : (وشم)

The symbols of the gods to whom the slaves belonged were stamped in the palms of their hands in the Kassite Period.<sup>26</sup> Also, the sacred animals of the goddess Ištar, were stamped with a star.

The symbols of gods were also used as decorative motifs in the temples (fig. 7) The Ištar Gate in Babylon (fig. 7) was decorated with reliefs of lions, bulls, and *mušhuš*'s. The lion stood for Ištar and the *mušhuš* represented the god Marduk, who passed through this gate with a procession. In the satire dedicated to Nabonid, the last King of Babylon<sup>28</sup>, Nabonid is made to say, as an excuse for converting the temple E-Sag-ila of Marduk to a temple of Sin, that the temple is already decorated with crescents instead of *marru*'s, (spade) which is the symbol of Marduk.

## III. Symbols of Gods on Kudurrus and Cylinder Seals

The symbols of gods on kudurrus and on cylinder seals are *either independent or figured together with the god*. On the kudurrus sometimes a script is seen directly beside the symbol showing to whom the symbol belongs<sup>29</sup> (fig. 3). Sometimes, as seen in

<sup>24</sup> A. Walther, *Gerichtswesen*, Leip. Sem. Stud. VI, 4-6, S. 225, Not I.

<sup>25</sup> Akkadian *burru*-Deimel, *Akkadisch-Sumerisches Glossar*, nigin, 529, (bar, 4,44.)

<sup>26</sup> For the Old Babylonian Period confer: Meissner, *Beitr. Zum Assyrl. Wör-terbuch*, multi-kakkabti, S. 55-56.

<sup>27</sup> R. Koldewey, *Das Ischtar-Tor in Babylon*, Leipzig, 1918.

<sup>28</sup> Landsberger-Bauer, *Geschichtsquellen*, *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, Neue Folge 3, 1/2, S. 88 f.

<sup>29</sup> K. Frank, *Bilder und Symbole Babylonisch Assyrischer Gotter*, *Leipziger Semitische Studien* II, 2, S. 5 ff.

the kudurru of Nazimaruttaš<sup>30</sup>, there are references in the texts about the symbols suggesting to which god they belong. Sometimes in the kudurru texts in the curse part, there are such references. The comparison of kudurrus with rock reliefs which contain similiar figures has been a great help in identifying the symbols of gods.

We are not taking into consideration the stamp seals because we think they belong to another field of study. The importance of the cylinder seals is very great because they are the richest source of knowlegge of the mythological and the religious concepts of the ancient Mesopotamian people. These objects of art, their number exceeding today 15,000 in all the museums in the world, give examples from every cultural period in sucession.

We have not yet identified and signified all the symbols. In order to fit them within the framework of the history of religion, we have to be acquainted with mythology. We are not able to explain every motif seen in the objects of art with written documents. We must not forget that, fakes exempted, the seal engravers were not all scholar or mythologists of their time nor great artists who newer made mistakes. We must always take into consideration the ignorance of the seal engraver, the neglect, and sometimes the obligation to comply to the wishes of the customer. Beside very excellent objects of art, we come across seals made in series. Sometimes it even happens that a seal belonging to another period of culture comes into use again years afterwards; and in complying with the new period and the new owner, a new motif is added to the olds ones (fig. 8). Sometimes, for similar reasons, additions are made in an entirely different style. It is because of such discrepancies that the figures of gods on the cylinder seals don't correspond with the inscriptions on them.

In interpreting the objects of art, we may commit objective and subjective faults. By objective faults we mean, as stated above, that in studying the seals, for example, we may misunderstand the inscriptions or the motifs added later or not be able to differentiate between a mythologic ensemble and an arbitrary ensemble of the

<sup>30</sup> H. Zimmer, *Die Göttersymbole des Nazimaruttaš-kudurru*, Leipziger Sem. Stud. II 2, S. 33-44.

engraver, or we may not be able to recognize the secondary scenes and the filling motifs.

Subjective faults: It is very natural that when we are deciding on such subjects, we are bound to the conceptions of our own period, and we decide according to the measures of today. It is not possible to construct the history of religion by only relying on the study of seals as H. Frankfort did. It is not necessary that every subject should have a mythological meaning.

Briefly, the purpose of this article is to contribute to the study of the cylinder seals by trying to put the data in a systematic order. Studies up to the present have not specifically considered these three main points: chronology, art, and interpretation. In the study of the cylinder seals we must proceed by consideration of these three aspects.

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