



Article

Boundary Stones (*Kudurru*)

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Abstract: This research presents an in-depth study of the *Kudurru* stones, highlighting their significant role in the economic and religious aspects of Mesopotamia. These stones contained important information regarding the prevailing political and geographical situations. The study traced the symbols and marks inscribed on the *Kudurru* stones, revealing aspects of religious life and the artistic style used to depict the gods' symbols. The forms of *Kudurru* stones varied, from slender tall pieces to flattened slabs. Their use became widespread during the Old Babylonian period, though not maintaining the same use in later eras. Meanwhile, the Middle Babylonian period witnessed a special flourishing of *Kudurru* stones under the Kassite dynasty's rule. The research aims to provide a comprehensive definition of *Kudurru* stones, calling them boundary stones that define the ownership of individuals and land areas. It clarifies their main types—private and public boundary stones—and describes them by shape, size, practical and religious functions. It highlights two carving styles used to make them and reviews prominent models, such as King Meli-Shipak's stone. The study analyzes the deity fields on these stones, classifying gods by rank and explaining the artistic importance of the symbol distribution. The research concludes by confirming the importance of *Kudurru* stones in Kassite art and their relation to thematically religious significant artistic topics.

Keywords: *Kudurru*, Mesopotamia, Ownership and Lands, Religious Symbols and Deities, Bas-relief Sculpture, Economic and Religious Function

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1. Introduction

Boundary stones (*Kudurru*) had an important and significant role in the economic and religious aspects of Mesopotamian life. Many boundary stones contained crucial information about the political and some cultural conditions prevailing in the region [1]. Studying the symbols of gods and curses inscribed on these boundary stones reveals facets of religious life and helps examine the artistic style used for the gods' symbols [2].

The boundary stones were long, not exceeding one meter in length, positioned on the ground to mark boundaries between districts. Some were deposited in temples as documents of land ownership rights recording the owner's name and the name of the land grantor [3].

Their use appeared on a limited scale during the Early Dynastic Period (2800–2370 BCE) but was not widespread in subsequent periods until they gained wide use in the Middle Babylonian period (1595–1157 BCE), during the Kassite rulers' era, becoming a hallmark of that period [4], [5].

This brief study addresses *Kudurru* boundary stones focusing on important points including their definition, types, and description.

Boundary Stones (*Kudurru*):

Definition and Naming of Boundary Stones

Boundary stones were stones whose function was to delimit ownership by individuals or land area boundaries, including the owner's name. They were deposited in sacred places and temples [6], [7]. Their use was very popular during the Kassite period and their origins date back to the third millennium BCE.

The term *Kudurru* refers to the small *Kudurru* of Larsa, an oval, almost flattened stone with a horizontal end at the bottom. The upper curved part contains carved images and symbols of gods, along with cuneiform texts indicating the prestige or immunity related to the owner. Anyone altering the immunity text was considered an aggressor against the gods carved on the stone [8], [9].

The name *Kudurru* (kudrru) is an Akkadian term meaning boundary or boundary stone and may also mean boundary marker. Its Sumerian equivalent is NI-DU, meaning boundary.

2. Materials and Methods

Types of Boundary Stones

There are two main categories:

- a. Private (Property) Boundary Stones: Grants given by the king to individuals, such as high officials, generals, priests, or refugees.
- b. General (Public) Boundary Stones: Contracts between individuals in society without royal intervention, used to record agreements as boundary stones.

Most *Kudurru* stones were made of black igneous diorite due to their hardness and resistance to weather, but other materials such as limestone and plaster were also used. Some examples were made on fired clay.

Description of Boundary Stones

- a. Called *Kudurru* meaning boundary stones.
- b. Rectangular with a rounded top.
- c. Made of various stones, ranging from 50 to 100 cm in height.
- d. Functioned practically like modern land deeds, recording private land ownership and boundaries, stored in temples.

3. Results and Discussion

Carving Styles

Two carving methods:

- a. First style: Carved on one side. The upper curved part shows religious scenes or god symbols in relief, including the sun disk (god Shamash), the crescent moon (god Sin), and planets symbolizing Ishtar, along with animal figures related to these gods, see Figure 1.



Figure 1. Symbols of gods carved in relief on *Kudurru stones* (sun disk of Shamash, crescent of Sin, and Ishtar's star).

The lower part contains boundary texts and cuneiform inscriptions protecting the king's immunity. Curses were written against anyone who breaks or alters the stone's text, see Figure 2.



Figure 2. Boundary inscriptions with cuneiform text and protective curses on *Kudurru stones*.

- b. Second style: Carved on both sides. The front side depicts a religious scene fully, while the back side contains cuneiform text inscriptions.

Religious Function

The stones portray religious scenes with various themes:

- A worshipper presenting offerings to a seated or standing god, see Figure 3.
- Scenes laden with many gods' symbols, meant to invoke fear and deterrence against those who alter the inscriptions [10].



Figure 3. Worshipper presenting offerings to a seated deity on a *Kudurru* stone.

Artistic Distribution

- Religious scenes are spread freely over the stone's surface without strict order.
- The background is divided into horizontal fields filled with religious events.

Artistic Importance

The carvings are simple outlining forms. The artist emphasized the stones' practical and religious functions over detailed artistic expression [11], [12].

Prominent Examples of *Kudurru* stones

A. King Meli-Shipak's *Kudurru* Stone, see Figure 4.



Figure 4. King Meli-Shipak's diorite *Kudurru* stone depicting Ishtar, Sin, and Shamash.

This stone, carved from diorite and about 90 cm high, is rectangular with a rounded top. The top depicts in low relief the gods' symbols: Ishtar's symbol, the crescent of Sin, and the solar disk of Shamash.

The scene shows Ishtar seated on her throne, raising her hands near her mouth in greeting, wearing the horned crown and a long, horizontally pleated robe. King Meli-Shipak stands humbly before Ishtar, raising his right hand in salute and holding his daughter Princess *Kudurru*'s hand with the left. The princess served as high priestess in the temple dedicated to her in Uruk, a prestigious position reserved for royal daughters [13].

B. King Meli-Shipak's *Kudurru* Stone in Limestone, see Figure 5.



Figure 5. King Meli-Shipak's limestone *Kudurru* stone with god symbols arranged in horizontal fields.

Measuring 68 cm, this rectangular stone also has a rounded top. The front side is carved with god symbols arranged in horizontal fields, according to Sumerian style, prioritizing the upper field [14], [15].

Symbols include: the crescent moon (Sin), eight-pointed star (Ishtar/Venus), four-rayed star (Shamash). The highest field shows god Anu and Enlil (horned crown above a temple symbolizing Enlil's temple).

Lower fields depict gods of the underworld and war, including Nergal, Zababa, and Ninurta. Further fields show Marduk (with a triangular banner on a dragon), Nabu (with cuneiform tablets), and the healing goddess Gula (symbol: human head on a dog) among others.

The final field includes the storm god Adad, the sacrificial god Nusku, agricultural god Enkirsu, and Kassite god Shuqamuna.

Artistic and Cultural Context

The relief carving on stones advanced during the late Babylonian period (12th century BCE), blending old and later themes, reflecting Kassites' worldview, especially their religious and mythological beliefs. These themes were extensively used earlier in seal engravings of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2112–2004 BCE).

Some motifs, like the eight-pointed pointed triangle inside a sun disk symbolizing Ishtar, were known since the Ur III period and appear on monuments like the Ur-Nammu stele.

The Kassite artists combined their gods with Babylonian deities, portraying both realistic and symbolic imagery of the divine. No other ancient Near Eastern art uses such an organized expression of divine symbols coupled with explanatory inscriptions.

Historical and Practical Importance

Some *Kudurru stones* reveal economic and legal details about land grants by kings and elite figures, indicating a tribal land system introduced in the Kassite era. Land granted was tax-free, considered a royal gift, not ownership that could be sold, and its boundaries marked by these stones stored in city temples for safekeeping. This suggests they functioned as legal documents preserving individuals' rights and city legitimacy.

Assyria later abandoned *Kudurru stones*, likely due to ideological shifts viewing land ownership differently, focusing on military and political ideology rather than religious symbolism, resulting in the loss of such records.

Astronomical and Symbolic Significance

At the top of these stones are symbols of the gods Ishtar, Sin, and Shamash, sometimes associated with ancient astronomical phenomena, as early peoples observed planetary orbits to predict weather and fate. Solar and lunar halos and eclipses signaled auspicious or ominous omens for lands, people, and rulers.

The circular disk carvings may represent the earth or celestial bodies, possibly relating to eclipse phenomena where the moon obscures the sun or earth's shadow falls on the moon. Though ancient astronomers did not fully understand Earth's sphericity, such representations suggest an early symbolic cosmic worldview.

4. Conclusion

Kassite artists developed a distinctive school of relief stone carving expressing religious beliefs through symbolic figures, combining legal, economic, and religious functions. *Kudurru stones* act as documents revealing social, economic, and religious life facets in Kassite Mesopotamia.

Results:

1. Boundary stones are categorized into two: ownership stones granted by kings, and public boundary stones used for private contracts.
2. They are rectangular with rounded tops, ranging in height from 50 to 100 cm.
3. They functioned similarly to modern property deeds.
4. Two carving styles exist: single-sided (upper religious scenes and lower inscriptions) and double-sided (religious scene on one side and cuneiform text on the other).
5. Religious themes dominate the stones.
6. The scenes are freely distributed without strict ordering.

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