

**The Writings of Some Sumerian Toponyms:
Their Emblematic and Semantic Origins**

The archaic writings of a number of Sumerian toponyms, particularly those of the major cult centers, provide a singular insight into the inner logic of the world's oldest known script and the rationale behind aspects of its invention. First, in terms of the origins of the system, these writings constitute a type of compounding, which represents a distinctive feature of Sumerian writing. Known as *diri*-compounds, these are composites of individual graphs, the phonetic values of which have little, or no, phonetic relationship to the aggregate. Similar graphic phenomena are attested for other writing systems, but Sumerian is remarkable in the extent to which it pursues this strategy, where such graphic aggregates can include four or more individual signs, e.g., ID₂.UD.KIB.NUN.NA = Buranuna (the Euphrates), UD.MA₂.ABxHA.ŠIR.KI = Sirara (a city-state), NIN.PAP.SIG₇.NUN.ME.EZENxKASKAL = nenkum (an official). The writings of the cult centers are among the earliest attested *diri*-compounds, and, unlike many others, the semantic criteria behind the choice of the individual components is discernable. Indeed, these writings may reveal a web of proto-literate cultural and religious associations, which would otherwise be unrecoverable. Second, in terms of the origins of the shapes of the individual cuneiform graphs, the signs that constitute the writings of these toponyms often have a material basis, being emblematic or iconographic representations that predate the origins of writing. Although the origins of cuneiform signs have been a topic of much discussion—having, it has been claimed, roots in both pictographic representations as well as the abstract forms of an antecedent accounting system—the graphs that constitute the toponyms in question belong to a minority of the cuneiform signary for which the ancestry is secure. This paper will address these two facets of toponym writings, and will consider the possibility that the emblematic basis of these writings may have been the inspiration for the *diri*-compound strategy that became a regular feature of the Sumerian writing system.