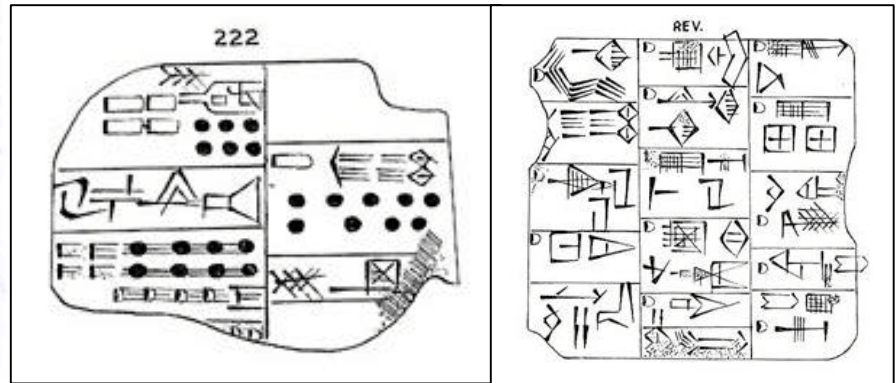


## Origin of the Sumerian Name and Sign for 'Wheat'

by John Alan Halloran, April 18, 2011



Above is the Sumerian pictograph for 'wheat', modified from R. Labat and F. Malbran-Labat, *Manuel d'Épigraphie Akkadienne*, 6<sup>e</sup> édition; Paris 1995, #446 on pp. 200. The GIG sign is shown in *Ur Excavations Texts 2* (Burrows, Eric; 1935), plate 222 in case 2,2, from the period ED I-II (ca. 2900-2700 BC). Also shown is the Reverse side of *UET 2*, 002, case 1,2. The lines in the NUNUZ part of the sign are most commonly transverse, as given, not parallel. The GIG sign occurs 11 times on the Early Dynastic I-II period tablets collected by the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative. The sign for wheat does not appear before the 2900-2700 BC period. During the earlier Uruk periods the sign for 'barley; grain', SZE, occurs in 611 texts. The sign ASZ<sub>2</sub>, 'emmer', occurs in two texts from Uruk III (ca. 3200-3000 BC) and in five texts from ED I-II.

Miguel Civil, *The Farmers Instructions* 1994, page 6, note 1 says that Labat's #446 is normally read *gig*, but is glossed *ki-ib* in an unpublished OB Nippur literary text. The on-line Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary follows Civil in making **kib**, 'wheat', the preferred reading, with *gig* and *gib* as alternatives.

The normal Akkadian word for 'wheat' is *kibtu*, which derives from the Semitic root *kbd*, meaning 'heavy'. The conjugated form *kibtu* means 'heaviness'. "When wheat is ready for harvest, the plant turns a golden color and the stalks bend under the weight of the heavy kernels." With the name *kibtu*, Semitic speakers called wheat "the heavier one of the grains" (suggested by Prof. Wu Yuhong of Northeast Normal University). Speakers of the Semitic Akkadian language must have introduced wheat into Sumer and the Sumerians borrowed the name **kib** from them. The earliest evidence for cultivation of wheat is from Abu Hureyra in Syria to the west.

The upper part of the Sumerian **kib** sign is the sign DUGUD, which means 'heavy'. The lower part is the sign NUNUZ, where **nunuz** refers to small round objects, including the beads of a necklace. At the top of a wheat stalk there is a string of large, hard kernels, much more so than with a barley stalk. So the Sumerians named wheat in pictography the 'grain of the heavy beads'.

The sign at the top represents rain falling from a cloud, so why does the sign mean 'heavy'? The sign by itself is called MI, meaning 'black, dark; shade', but the MI sign frequently interchanges with the DUGUD sign that adds a vertical stroke at the bottom (cf., the writings of both IM-DUGUD and IM-MI for **anzu**, the mythical storm bird). The sign for 'wheat' replaces the vertical stroke or AŠ sign in DUGUD with the NUNUZ sign. My *Sumerian Lexicon* book defines **dugud** as "n., weight; cloud; v. to be important; adj., heavy; massive; difficult, hard." The normal Sumerian word for 'rain cloud' is **dungu**, written in the Old Babylonian period as IM-SI-A. The pictograph for rain-cloud would have been read originally as **dungu**. But then the sign acquired the more important reading **dugud**, 'heavy', because the words sounded similar and it is hard to draw a picture of 'heavy'. The words **dungu** and **dugud** have no more relationship in the spoken language than do **ti**, 'rib; arrow' and **ti(-l)**, 'life; to live' (famously the same in Sumerian writing). The generation that adapted the signs of proto-cuneiform to represent all the words of the spoken Sumerian language, creating true writing, only had so many signs with which to represent the spoken vocabulary. They had to overload existing pictographs in order to represent concepts that were too abstract to draw. I think that this is what happened with the original sign for **dungu**, 'rain cloud', and the word **dugud**, 'heavy, difficult'.