The present paper describes a group of (mainly lexical) compositions that may be labeled the “Kiš Corpus.” This corpus, which includes a number of well-known third millennium lexical texts such as ED Lu E and Animals B, as well as some lesser-known compilations such as Practical Vocabulary A, may have functioned as a counterbalance to the venerable ancient written tradition of the South, exemplified by ED Lu A and other lexical texts that went back all the way to the beginning of writing in Archaic Uruk. I will argue that although on the surface the compositions in the Kiš Corpus may seem to be written in Sumerian, in fact these texts were meant to be read in the Semitic language that characterized the Kiš cultural continuum.

Royal inscriptions and administrative texts indicate that in the first half of the third millennium Kiš was the most important political and economic center in the north of Babylonia. While the information about the political structure of the period is scarce and hard to interpret, it is likely that there existed a Northern territorial kingdom, based in the city of Kiš. This kingdom occasionally extended its influence deep into southern Babylonia. Mesilim, king of Kiš, intervened in the border conflict between the southern cities of Umma and Ğirsu, acting as an arbiter.

I wish to thank Gonzalo Rubio for taking the time to read a version of this article and provide me with a number of highly relevant references.


See Jerrold S. Cooper, Reconstructing History from Ancient Inscriptions: the Lagash-Umma Border Conflict (Sources from the Ancient Near East 2/1, Malibu: Undena Publications 1983).
The concept of the “Kiš Civilization” describes a cultural continuum that connects Abū Ṣalābīḫ, Mari, Tell Beydar (Nabada) and Ebla. Although it is assumed that Kiš is the center of gravity of this continuum, in fact the city has not yielded any contemporary records, with the exception of a few stone fragments. The cultural connections included a shared language, discussed in detail most recently by Gonzalo Rubio, shared writing conventions, shared systems for number writing and dating, a shared set of anthroponyms and a shared set of compositions, the topic of the present paper.

The writing system in use in these early texts is heavily logographic, so that at times it is not easy to decide which language is used. Regular administrative documents use Sumerian logograms to write both nouns and verbs – only prepositions and other word classes may be written syllabically. Rubio describes the varieties and possibilities of the interface of writing and language in mid-third millennium Ebla and compares that situation to the uses of Chinese characters in Japanese. Rubio argues that at Ebla there may have been two styles of reading a text written in Sumerian: by Semiticizing the Sumerian (adding Semitic endings) or entirely in Semitic. The writing interface, however, does not provide explicit clues to indicate which reading mode is intended.

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8 “Writing in Another Tongue” 41–45.