

THE CODE OF HAMMURABI

Eventually a group of people known as the Babylonians came to dominate Mesopotamia. Their capital was the city of Babylon on the Euphrates River. The Babylonian Empire reached its peak during the reign of Hammurabi from 1792 B.C. to 1750 B.C. Hammurabi's most enduring legacy is the code of laws he compiled.

Hammurabi recognized that a single, uniform code of laws would help unify the diverse groups within his empire. He collected existing rules, judgments, and laws into the Code of Hammurabi, which he had engraved into stone. This was less a collection of original laws and more of a list of legal precedents collected over the years of Hammurabi's reign. Copies of the code were sent all over the empire. One copy that was unearthed by archeologists was chiseled on a black stone slab over seven feet high. The code's punishments ranged from fines to death, and sentencing depended on the social status and gender of those involved in the case.



Below are some interesting highlights from the 282 laws from the Code of Hammurabi:

8. If anyone steals cattle or sheep or a donkey or a pig or a goat that belonged to a temple or a palace, the thief shall pay thirtyfold. If they belonged to a private citizen, he shall pay tenfold. If the thief has nothing with which to pay, he shall be put to death.

22. If anyone is committing a robbery and is caught, then he shall be put to death.

23. If the robber is not caught, then the person who was robbed shall claim under oath the amount of his loss. Then the community...shall compensate him for the goods stolen.

25. If fire breaks out in a house and someone who comes to put it out casts his eye upon the property of the owner of the house and takes the property of the master

of the house, he shall be thrown into that same fire.

110. If a priestess enters a tavern to drink, this woman shall be burned to death.

129. If a husband catches his wife with another man, both shall be tied and thrown into the water, but the husband may pardon his wife and the king can pardon his slaves.

132. If the "finger is pointed" at a man's wife about lying with another man but she is not caught sleeping with the other man, she shall jump into the river for her husband.

138. If a man wishes to separate from his wife who has borne him no children, he shall give her the amount of her purchase money and the dowry which she brought from her father's house and let her go.

142. If a woman hates her husband and says to him, "You cannot be with me," the authorities in her district will investigate the case. If she has been chaste and without fault, even though her husband has neglected or belittled her, she will be held innocent and may return to her father's house.

143. If the woman is at fault, she shall be thrown into the river.

157. If anyone be guilty of incest with his mother...both shall be burned.

192. If a son of a lover or a prostitute says to his adoptive father or mother, "You are not my father or my mother," his tongue shall be cut off.

195. If a son strikes his father, his hands shall be hewn off.

196. If a man puts out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out.

197. If he breaks another man's bone, his bone shall be broken.

198. If he puts out the eye of a free man or breaks the bone of a free man, he shall pay one gold mina.

199. If he puts out the eye of a man's slave or breaks the bone of a man's slave, he shall pay one half of its value.

202. If anyone strikes the body of a man higher in rank than he, he shall receive sixty blows with an ox-whip in public.

226. If a barber, without the knowledge of his master, cuts the sign of a slave on a slave not to be sold, the hands of this barber shall be cut off.

229. If a builder builds a house for someone and does not construct it properly and the house which he built falls in and kills its owner, then that builder shall be put to death.

230. If it kills the son of the owner, the son of that builder shall be put to death.

231. If it kills a slave of the owner, then he shall pay slave for slave to the owner of the house.

282. If a slave says to his master, "You are not my master," and they convict him, his master shall cut off his ear.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is "an eye for an eye" judgment and how is it reflected in the Code of Hammurabi?
2. How can you tell some of the laws in the Code of Hammurabi are biased toward the powerful?
3. How can you tell some of the laws are biased toward men?
4. Which law strikes you as the strangest? Explain.
5. **Analyze:** Why are laws important to civilization?
6. **Connect:** In your opinion what are the three most important laws in your country?