

Hammurabi was king of Babylonia, a city-state in ancient Mesopotamia. He ruled from about 1792 to 1750 BCE. During his long reign, he recorded a set of rules for his kingdom to obey. These rules are thought to be the oldest laws in the world! While the most well-known law is “an eye for an eye,” the Code of Hammurabi included 282 other laws, too.

Hammurabi believed these laws came from the god Marduk to bring virtue and honesty to the land and to destroy wicked evil doers.

Hammurabi wanted to protect the weak. Who was this man who wanted to bring a sense of justice and right to his land?

Hammurabi was the son of Sin-muballit, who was king for 20 years. Hammurabi succeeded the throne, just like his father and grandfather. He was the sixth king of the first Babylonian dynasty, and he ruled over the 400-year-old city of Babylon.



Hammurabi, the king of Babylonia, ruled from 1792 to 1750 BCE.

One of Hammurabi’s accomplishments was using his army to retain control of the Euphrates River. The river was important to Babylonians because it was a main source of irrigation for the farms. The downstream kingdom of Larsa also fought for control of the river. Hammurabi’s armies used a strategy of damming the river to win control of the waterway. The dams cut off the water supply for Larsa. Hammurabi also used the dams as a weapon. The dams could be released, sending a destructive flood of water to an area. This could be used to wipe out an advancing army. By controlling the river’s flow, the Babylonians were able to seize lands in Larsa. With increased access to the waterway, they were then able to take control of ancient Sumerian city-states.

With the southern Euphrates in his possession, Hammurabi began to look at the northern cities on the river. He focused on the city of Mari, which his ally King Zimrilim ruled. Zimrilim had helped the Babylonians conquer the southern cities in Larsa. However, Hammurabi turned on his ally and sacked the city of Mari. With the taking of Mari, combined with the occupation of the Tigris River city of Eshnunna, Hammurabi expanded his kingdom. This was a great accomplishment for the king, as the city-states of Mesopotamia were now united under a single ruler.

With such a large kingdom, Hammurabi developed set laws to retain order. He wrote the laws on large tablets. The laws outlined how people should act. Family disputes, trade practices, criminal punishment, and ethics are all

covered in his code. The penalties for breaking minor laws are harsh by today's standards. These harsh penalties can give us a way to better understand what was acceptable during Hammurabi's time.

Hammurabi's Code is divided into three parts. Part 1, the prologue, details Hammurabi's contributions to the kingdom. It also declares that he was sent by the god Marduk to rule over men and ensure the protection of the oppressed. Part 2 is a collection of rigid societal laws, and Part 3 is the epilogue. Hammurabi addresses every social class in Babylonian society with his rules. Each case gives a different outcome if the person was enslaved or a freeman, as well as a man or woman. While not all treatments were equal, each rank had a recognized place in society.

202. If a man strike the person of a man (i.e., commit an assault) who is his superior, he shall receive sixty strokes with an ox-tail whip in public.

203. If a man strike another man of his own rank, he shall pay one mana of silver.

204. If a freeman strike a freeman, he shall pay ten shekels of silver.

205. If a man's slave strike a man's son, they shall cut off his ear.

Reading the laws today, the punishments may seem overly cruel. For example, the punishment for robbery was death, and if a person stole a sheep, he or she had to pay a fine 30 times greater than the value of the sheep. However, Hammurabi's system is based on a sense of justice—and even warning. If a person knew that the punishment for stealing was death, he or she would be less likely to steal. Other offenses were countered with equal punishments. If you broke someone's nose, that person could break your nose. An eye for an eye!

Hammurabi's system also detailed how certain situations should be handled, such as disobedience, divorces, and thievery. Many of the laws focus on the family, which was important in Babylonian society. Guidelines for engagements, adultery, children, inheritance, and divorce are clearly laid out.



Hammurabi's Code is recognized in legal literature as one of the earliest surviving legal codes. This image shows some of the original cuneiform found on the walls of Babylon.

Much of Hammurabi's Code is written with the intent of maintaining not only a fair justice system but also a balanced economy. The code lists guidelines for commerce and behavior in society. Specific amounts for payments of jobs by barbers, veterinarians, surgeons, and builders are set. Hammurabi took into account the fees for poorly performed work and refunds. Law 225 states that if a veterinarian accidentally kills an animal during surgery, such as an ox, he must pay one-quarter of the animal's value to the owner. Hammurabi's Code not only held social behaviors to prescribed standards, but it also held professionals accountable for their work.

The epilogue to Hammurabi's Code sets out to guide the kingdom through its difficulties. Hammurabi addressed the rights and responsibilities of his subjects, which allowed them the opportunity to resolve their own disputes—thereby maintaining order in the kingdom. Hammurabi believed that his system of justice was right, and in the epilogue he warns any person who dares to change it.

Hammurabi died in 1750 BCE and was succeeded by his son Samsuiluna. After Hammurabi died, provinces at the edge of Babylonian broke away as their powerful neighbors, including the Hittites and then the Kassites, invaded. Much of the empire broke up into independent city-states, ending the unification of Hammurabi's empire.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. Hammurabi addresses every social class in Babylonian society with his rules. The term *social class* refers to which of the following?
 - A. the rules for how to act when out in public
 - B. a place where students went to learn Hammurabi's Code
 - C. a group of people who make all the rules for society
 - D. groups of people in society organized by wealth and power
2. According to the passage, what was the punishment for stealing sheep?
 - A. death
 - B. two years in jail
 - C. replace the sheep with double the number of stolen sheep
 - D. pay a fine 30 times greater than the value of the sheep
3. Which of the following was a military technique used by Hammurabi to defeat the kingdom of Larsa?
 - A. releasing a dam to flood approaching soldiers
 - B. retreating before battle could begin
 - C. writing a revised version of the code
 - D. cutting off the food supply to Larsa
4. Today, people look at Hammurabi's Code as a way to better understand Mesopotamian society. How can the code teach us about issues of equality and the importance of law in ancient Mesopotamia? In your answer, use supporting details and examples from the reading passage.