

Hammurabi's Code

Nearly 4000 years ago, a man named Hammurabi (ha-moo-rob-bee) became king of a small city-state called Babylon. Today, Babylon exists only as an archaeological site in central Iraq. But in Hammurabi's time, it was the capital of the kingdom of Babylonia.

We know little about the Hammurabi's personal life- we don't know his birth date, how many wives or children he had, or how and when he died. We aren't even sure what he looked like. However, thanks to thousands of clay writing tablets that have been found by archaeologists, we know something about Hammurabi's military campaigns and his dealings with surrounding city-states. We also know quite a bit about everyday life in Babylonia.

The tablets tell us that Hammurabi ruled for 42 years. For the first 30 of these years, Hammurabi's control was limited mostly to the city of Babylon. After military victories over city-states like Larsa in the South and Mari in the north, Hammurabi eventually came to control much of Mesopotamia, an estimated population of 1 million people.

After the wars in Larsa and Mari, Hammurabi reflected on peace and justice. Hammurabi had 282 laws carved on a large pillar of stone called a stele (stee-lee). Together, these laws are referred to by historians as Hammurabi's Code.

The following are excerpts taken from Hammurabi's Code-

Document A:

... Hammurabi, the protecting king am I. ... That the strong might not injure the weak, in order to protect the widows and orphans, ... I set up these my precious words, written upon my memorial stone, before the image of me, as king of righteousness.

.... By the command of Shamash, the great god and judge of heaven and earth, let righteousness go forth in the land.... Let no destruction befall my monument ... let my name be ever repeated; let the oppressed, who has a case at law, come and stand before this my image as king of righteousness; let him read the inscription, and understand my precious words....

... In future time, through all coming generations, let the king, who may be in the land, observe the words of righteousness which I have written on my monument; let him not alter the law of the land which I have given....

... If this ruler does not esteem my words, ... if he destroys the law which I have given, ... may the great gods of heaven and earth ... inflict a curse ... upon his family, his land, his warriors, his subjects, and his troops.

Document B:

Law 129: If a married lady is caught [in adultery] with another man, they shall bind them and cast them into the water.

Law 148: If a man has married a wife and a disease has seized her, if he is determined to marry a second wife, he shall marry her. He shall not divorce the wife whom the disease has seized. She shall dwell in the house they have built together, and he shall maintain her as long as she lives.

Document C:

Law 168: If a man has determined to disinherit his son and has declared before the judge, "I cut off my son," the judge shall inquire into the son's past, and, if the son has not committed a grave misdemeanor ..., the father shall not disinherit his son.

Law 195: If a son has struck his father, his hands shall be cut off.

Document D:

Law 196: If a man has knocked out the eye of a free man, his eye shall be knocked out.

Law 199: If he has knocked out the eye of a slave ... he shall pay half his value.

Law 209: If a man strikes the daughter of a free man and causes her to lose the fruit of her womb, he shall pay 10 shekels of silver...

Law 213: If he has struck the slave-girl of a free man and causes her to lose the fruit of her womb, he shall pay 2 shekels of silver.

Hammurabi was not the first Mesopotamian ruler to put his laws into writing. In fact, the Sumerian people that had first developed Mesopotamian civilization developed cuneiform in 3500 BCE, over a thousand years before Hammurabi took power. Hammurabi's Code, however, is the most complete. By studying his code, historians have been able to understand life in Babylonian society, everyday problems, government systems, and Hammurabi's attempts to bring law and order to Mesopotamia.