NO PREP

Hammurabi's Code

Justice Carved in Stone

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Hammurabi's Code: Justice Carved in Stone

The King Who Wrote the Rules

Around 1792 BCE, a king named Hammurabi came to power in the city of Babylon. He was not the first ruler of Babylon, and Babylon was not yet the greatest city in Mesopotamia. But Hammurabi changed that. Through a combination of military conquest and diplomatic skill, he unified most of Mesopotamia under Babylonian rule within thirty years of taking the throne. By the time he was done, he controlled territory stretching from the Persian Gulf to the upper reaches of the Euphrates River. Hammurabi understood something that every successful empire-builder eventually learns: conquest is easier than administration. Once you have conquered diverse city-states with their own traditions, legal customs, and local gods, you need a way to impose order across the whole. His solution was one of the most audacious administrative acts in ancient history: he commissioned a comprehensive law code — 282 laws carved onto a massive black diorite stele nearly 2.3 meters tall — and had copies distributed across his empire so that every subject could, in theory, know the

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Eye for an Eye: How the Code Actually Worked

The phrase 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' comes from Hammurabi's Code, and it is often cited as an example of brutal ancient justice. In context, it was actually a principle of proportionality: the punishment should fit the crime, and the victim's injury should be matched rather than exceeded. In a world where powerful nobles could previously demand whatever punishment they wanted for offenses against them, this represented a form of protection. If a noble put out a commoner's eye, the noble could not just pay a small fine: he would lose his own eye. The code covers an enormous range of situations: construction liability (if a builder's house collapses and kills the owner, the builder is put to death), trade regulations

(exact rules for interest rates on loans), family law (rules for marriage, divorce, and inheritance), and professional standards (fees that doctors, barbers, and boatmen could charge). There are laws protecting women from arbitrary abandonment, laws governing the rights of slaves, and laws about what happens when a soldier is captured by the enemy and someone else takes his field and his wife.

Class Justice: Not Everyone Is Equal Before the Law

The Code of Hammurabi is not a document of equality. It explicitly divides society into three classes: free persons (awilum), dependent persons or commoners (mushkenum), and slaves (wardum). The punishments for crimes differ dramatically depending on the class of the victim and the class of the perpetrator. If a free person destroys the eye of another free person, they lose their own eye. If a free person destroys the eye of a commoner, they pay sixty silver shekels as a fine. If a free person destroys the eye of a slave, they pay half the slave's purchase price to the slave's owner. This makes the Code simultaneously more sophisticated than its reputation and more troubling than its admirers often acknowledge. It is a legal system, yes, but it is a legal system explicitly designed to reinforce social hierarchy rather than challenge it. The very act of writing down the law creates a kind of legitimacy for the system it encodes. By carving these rules in stone and displaying them publicly, Hammurabi was not just announcing what the rules were; he was claiming divine sanction for a social order in which inequality was built into the law itself.

The Stele: Discovery and Context

Hammurabi's Code was not discovered in Babylon. In the twelfth century BCE, the Elamite king Shutruk-Nahhunte conquered Babylon and carried the stele back to his capital city of Susa as a trophy of conquest. It remained there, buried under debris, until a French archaeological expedition led by Jacques de Morgan discovered it in three pieces at Susa (in modern Iran) in 1901-1902. The stele was shipped to the Louvre Museum in Paris, where it remains today — one of the most visited objects in the collection. The top of the stele shows a carved relief: Hammurabi standing before the sun god Shamash, who is handing him the rod and ring that symbolize justice and kingship. The image is deliberate political messaging: Hammurabi is not just a king who made up laws, but a king who received justice from the gods themselves and is passing it on to his people. The divine framing gave the law code

religious authority that made it very difficult to challenge. If the law came from the gods, who could argue against it?

Key Information: Hammurabi's Code

Detail	Information
King	Hammurabi of Babylon, reigned c. 1792-1750 BCE
Number of Laws	282 laws covering commerce, family, property, and professional conduct
Material	Black diorite stone stele, approximately 2.3 meters tall
Image at Top	Hammurabi receiving justice from the sun god Shamash
Discovery	Susa, Iran, 1901-1902, by French expedition (Jacques de Morgan)
Current Location	Louvre Museum, Paris
Social Classes	Three classes: awilum (free), mushkenum (commoner), wardum (slave)
Famous Principle	Proportional justice ('eye for an eye') — punishment matches the offense

Case Study: Naram the Merchant's Trial

Naram the textile merchant had not expected the matter to go this far. He had sold a bolt of wool to the palace administrator Enlil-bani, and Enlil-bani had sent it back three days later with a complaint: the wool was defective, he said, and he wanted his silver back along with compensation for his wasted time. Naram disagreed. The wool had been inspected before sale. He had witnesses. He also knew, privately, that Enlil-bani's wife had been seen at the market buying cloth of similar quality at a lower price two weeks after their transaction — which suggested the administrator had simply found a better deal and wanted to back out of the original purchase. They brought the dispute before the city judges. Naram brought his witnesses, who confirmed the wool had met standard quality at time of sale. Enlil-bani brought his witnesses, who said the defect had been present from the beginning. The judges consulted the law: according to the Code, if a merchant sells goods that are later claimed to be defective, the burden of proof is on the buyer to demonstrate the defect was present at sale. 'You are a free merchant,' the senior judge told Naram, 'and Enlil-bani is a palace administrator. The law applies to you equally in this matter.' Enlil-bani lost the case. He left the court with his jaw set in a way that made Naram nervous, because the law might apply equally in this matter, but outside the courtroom, power still arranged itself the old way.

1. The case study ends with Naram winning the legal case but remaining nervous about Enlil-bani's reaction. Based on the reading's discussion of class in Hammurabi's Code, what does this suggest about the difference between what a law says and how it actually functions in a society with sharp class divisions?

2. The stele of Hammurabi shows the king receiving the law from the sun god Shamash. How did this visual framing serve a political purpose, and why might Hammurabi have chosen to display the law code publicly rather than keeping it as an internal administrative document?

Multiple Choice

1. What was the primary political purpose of creating and distributing Hammurabi's Code across his empire?

a) To eliminate the need for local judges and courts

b) To create a formal religious document that replaced the authority of local temples

c) To demonstrate Babylonian military superiority over Sumerian city-states

d) To impose uniform laws and reinforce royal authority across conquered territories

2. The Code of Hammurabi divided society into three classes. Which statement best describes how this affected the law?

a) The punishment for harming someone depended on the class of both victim and perpetrator

b) Slaves received harsher punishments than free persons for the same offense

c) All three classes received identical punishments for identical crimes

d) The Code only applied to free persons and ignored all crimes involving commoners or slaves

3. The Code of Hammurabi was found not in Babylon but in Susa, Iran. How did it end up there?

a) Hammurabi himself moved his capital to Susa late in his reign

b) An Elamite king conquered Babylon and carried the stele away as war spoils

c) The stele was hidden in Susa during a civil war to protect it from destruction

d) A French archaeologist purchased it from a Babylonian merchant

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Hammurabi	A) A tall upright stone monument carved with inscriptions or relief images
2. ___ Stele	B) The Mesopotamian sun god of justice, depicted handing the law to Hammurabi on the stele
3. ___ Awilum	C) Babylonian king who unified Mesopotamia and commissioned one of history's earliest law codes
4. ___ Shamash	D) In Hammurabi's Code, a dependent person or commoner, below the free class
5. ___ Mushkenum	E) The highest social class in Hammurabi's Code — a free person with full legal standing

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Hammurabi's Code contains _____ laws covering subjects from construction liability to family law to professional fees.

2. The stele of Hammurabi was discovered in 1901-1902 in the ancient city of _____, in modern-day Iran, where it had been taken as a war trophy.

3. The phrase 'an eye for an eye' from Hammurabi's Code reflects the principle of _____ justice, meaning the punishment should match the offense.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. In what sense was Hammurabi's Code an advance in justice, and in what sense did it reinforce inequality? Use specific examples from the reading.

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2. Why would Hammurabi have chosen to carve the law code in stone and display it publicly, rather than simply issuing written orders to his administrators?

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3. The Code of Hammurabi is often described as one of history's earliest legal documents, but similar law codes existed before it. Why does it remain historically significant even if it was not the first?

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