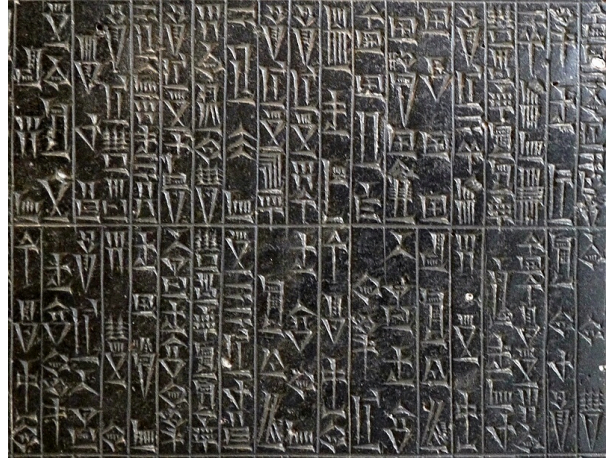




Hammurabi's law code was carved onto a stone pillar and set in a public place for all to see. It was the first formal, codified collection of laws that we know about in history.



Close up of the inscription



The carving at the top of the pillar shows king Hammurabi receiving the laws directly from the Babylonian god Marduk.

What do you think is the importance of this carving?
What does it imply?

Selections from the Code of Hammurabi

Before this portrait let every man who has a legal dispute come forward, read this text, and heed its precious words. The stone tablet will enlighten him in his trouble, and thus may he find justice and breathe easier in his heart, speaking these words: "Hammurabi is a king who cares for his people like a loving father."

We know the creation of organized governments is a big part of the shift to "civilizations" in human history. How does the introduction show us what people thought the role of leaders was?

If a man brings an accusation against a man, and charges him with a capital crime (a crime for which the punishment is death), but cannot prove it, he, the accuser, shall be put to death.

If he has offered grain or money to the witnesses, (to persuade them to say one thing or another) he shall himself bear the sentence of that case.

How does it feel to be wrongfully accused? Is death a fair punishment for wrongful accusation?

If any one owes a debt for a loan, and a storm prostrates (bends down, ruins) the grain, or the harvest fails, or the grain does not grow for lack of water; in that year he need not give his creditor any grain, he washes his debt-tablet in water and pays no rent for this year.

If anyone is too lazy to keep his dam in proper condition, and does not so keep it; if then the dam breaks and all the fields be flooded, then shall he in whose dam the break occurred be sold for money, and the money shall replace the crop which he has caused to be ruined.

What type of people do the above laws attempt to protect?

Is it fair to say that a farmer doesn't owe money on his debts if his crop fails?

Is it fair to sell someone into slavery that didn't maintain his dam?

How does the part about "washing debt tablets in water" reflect what we know about Mesopotamian record keeping?

If any one gives another silver, gold, or anything else to keep, he shall show everything to some witness, draw up a contract, and then hand it over for safekeeping.

This law emphasizes the importance of keeping formal records. Why is record keeping useful and important in this situation?

If a man wish to put his son out of his house, and declare before the judge: "I want to put my son out," then the judge shall examine into his reasons. If the son be guilty of no great fault, for which he can be rightfully put out, the father shall not put him out.

Should parents be able to kick their kids out of the house? Does behavior matter? Does age?

If a man has stolen ox or sheep or ass or pig or ship, from the temple or the palace, he shall pay thirtyfold (thirty times the value of the stolen animal). If they belonged to a free subject of the king, he shall pay tenfold. If the thief has nought (nothing) to pay, he shall be put to death.

Do you think it is fair to have different punishments for theft based on who was stolen from? What does this law tell us about the status of priests in Babylonian society?

If a builder builds a house for someone, even though he has not yet completed it; if then the walls seem toppling, the builder must make the walls solid from his own means. If a builder builds a house for some one, and does not construct it properly, and the house which he built falls in and kill its owner, then that builder shall be put to death. If the owner of the home's son is killed by an improperly constructed building, the builder's son shall be put to death.

Is it fair, in general, to punish builders for unsafe construction? Is this punishment fair?

If a veterinary surgeon performs a serious operation on an ass or an ox, and cures it, the owner shall pay the surgeon one-sixth of a shekel as a fee. If he performs a serious operation on an ass or ox, and kills it, he shall pay the owner one-fourth of its value.

If a physician operate on a man for a severe wound with a bronze lancet (surgical knife) and causes the man's death; or opens an abscess (in the eye) of a man with a bronze lancet and destroy the man's eye, they shall cut off his fingers.

Are these laws fair? Do we have similar laws today?

On assault and violence...

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

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

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

If he put out the eye of a man's slave, or break the bone of a man's slave, he shall pay one-half of its value.

If a man knock out the teeth of his equal, his teeth shall be knocked out.

If he knock out the teeth of a freed man (former slave), he shall pay one-third of a gold mina (a coin).

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

If a free-born man strike the body of another free-born man or equal rank, he shall pay one gold mina.

How do these shows extreme inequality in Babylonian society?

On stealing people...

If a man has stolen the son of a freeman, he shall be put to death.

If a man has harboured in his house a manservant or a maidservant, fugitive from the palace, or a poor man, and has not produced them at the demand of the commandant, the owner of that house shall be put to death.

If any one receives into his house a runaway male or female slave of the court, or of a freedman, and does not bring it out at the public proclamation of the major domus, the master of the house shall be put to death. . .

On stealing property...

If anyone breaks a hole into a house [breaks in to steal], he shall be put to death before that hole and be buried.

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