

Hammurabi's Code: Was It Just?

Nearly 4,000 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 Hammurabi’s personal life. We don’t know his birth date, how many wives and 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. He was involved in what one historian

calls, “lots of squabbles with other small kings in other small city-states,” some of them no more than 50 miles away. This changed, however. With victories over Larsa in the south and Mari in the north, Hammurabi became the ruler of much of **Mesopotamia**.

Hammurabi was not starting with a blank slate. Beginning around 3500 BCE, the Sumerian people had developed Mesopotamia into the world’s first civilization. By the time Hammurabi took power in 1792 BCE, **cuneiform** writing had already been around for 1,700 years.

Hammurabi would eventually rule over an estimated population of 1,000,000. Most of his subjects were farmers. The people lived in city-states surrounded by fields, watered by irrigation canals that were fed by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

After his victories at Larsa and Mari, Hammurabi’s thoughts of war gave way to thoughts of peace. These, in turn, gave way to thoughts of justice. In the 38th year of his rule, Hammurabi had 282 laws carved on a large, pillar-like stone called a **stele** (“stee-lee”). Together, these laws have been called Hammurabi’s Code. Historians believe that several of these inscribed steles were placed around the kingdom, though only one has been found intact.

Hammurabi was not the first Mesopotamian ruler to put his laws into writing, but his code is the most complete. By studying his

laws, historians have been able to get a good picture of many aspects of Babylonian society—work and family life, social structures, trade and government. For example, we know that there were three distinct social classes: land owners, free people who did not own land, and slaves. The many farm and irrigation laws tell us that Babylonians depended upon their crops for survival.

The code also tells us of everyday problems, like buildings collapsing, oxen getting loose and trampling fields, and neighbors squabbling, much as they do today. Hammurabi tried to bring order and fairness to it all.

What follows are five documents that provide a sampling of Hammurabi’s laws. Some students of Babylonia have found the laws overly harsh. Others have found them to be quite balanced, given the hard realities of ancient life.

In this Mini-Q, you are asked to consider justice on three levels: fairness to the accused, fairness to the victim, and fairness and security for society. With these measuring sticks in mind, read the documents and answer the question: *Hammurabi’s Code: Was it just?*

