

Student Handout 4: Excerpts from King Hammurabi's Code¹

Hammurabi ruled Babylon, an important kingdom in Mesopotamia from 1792-1750 BC/BCE, towards the end of Era 2. The region had been in conflict for a long time before he came to power. He used his army to get control of areas in southern and north-central Mesopotamia. He established almost complete control over these areas, and one way he did this was through his development of a written code of laws. As far as we know, this was not the first written code of law in human history, but it is the earliest legal code which archaeologists have found and deciphered in its entirety.

Excerpts from Hammurabi's Code from Babylon (About 1700 BCE)

1. If a man accuses another of murder but cannot prove it, the accuser shall be put to death.
8. If a man steals, he shall repay thirty fold. If he hasn't the money, he shall be put to death.
15. If a man helps a slave to escape from the city, he shall be put to death.
22. If a man practices robbery and is captured, that man shall be put to death.
55. If a man opens a canal for irrigation and neglects it and the water floods a nearby field, he shall pay grain to the owner of the adjacent field.
117. If a man sells his wife or child to settle a debt, they shall work in the house of the buyer for three years, and regain their freedom in the fourth.
195. If a man strikes his father, they shall cut off his hand.
202. If a man strikes the cheek of his superior, he shall receive sixty strokes with an oxtail whip.
204. If a common man strikes a common man on the cheek, he shall pay ten shekels of silver.
205. If a man's slave strikes the son of a gentleman on the cheek, they shall cut off his ear.
206. If a man strikes another in a quarrel and wounds him, but swears: "I did not strike him intentionally," he shall only be responsible for paying the physician.
209. If a man strikes the daughter of another and causes a miscarriage, he shall pay ten shekels. If the woman dies, they shall put his daughter to death.

For each item from the Code identified by number in the left-hand column, describe the offense and the consequence. Then summarize your personal reaction to this law.

¹ Source: Cohn-Haft, Louis. Source Readings in Ancient History, Vol. 1 (New York: T.Y. Crowell, 1965), 66-68; 79-81; 89-91; 96-97. Some of the language has been simplified by Anne Chapman. In <http://worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu/units/three/landscape/03_landscape3.pdf> Accessed 6/5/10.

Graphic Organizer for Student Handout 4

	Action or offense	Consequence or punishment	My reaction (what I think about this)
1			
15			
55			
202 / 204			
209			