Code of Hammurabi

Pre-Lesson Discussion Questions:

1. What is the purpose of having laws?

2. What can you learn about a civilization from its laws?

3. Is the effectiveness in providing stability, preventing crime; maintaining control and order, the most important thing when it comes to a code of laws? Explain why or why not.
**Historical Context / Background**

Hammurabi was King of the Babylonian Empire around the year 1750 BCE. His greatest legacy was his list of laws relating to everyday life. From the most severe crimes, to marriages and trading regulations, Hammurabi believed that a single, uniform code would unify the many diverse groups of his empire. The code of Hammurabi contained 282 laws and were engraved on steles (large stone monuments) and placed around his empire for all to see. Unlike earlier laws, Hammurabi had his written in Akkadian, the daily language of Babylon so that they could be read by any literate person. The structure of the code is very specific, with each offense receiving a specific punishment. Hammurabi was a very efficient ruler, giving the region stability after turbulent times, and transforming what had been an unstable collection of city-states into an empire that spanned the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia.

![Map of Babylonian Empire](http://sitemaker.umich.edu/mladkov/files/mesopotamia1200.jpg)

Source: Adapted from [http://sitemaker.umich.edu/mladkov/files/mesopotamia1200.jpg](http://sitemaker.umich.edu/mladkov/files/mesopotamia1200.jpg)

1. Based on the historical context, what are your initial impressions of Hammurabi as a leader?

2. What additional information would be helpful to further develop your understanding of Hammurabi and his code of laws?
Document #1: Code of Hammurabi – Economy

53. If anyone be too lazy to keep his dam in proper condition, and does not so keep it; if then the dam break 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 corn which he has caused to be ruined.

54. If he be not able to replace the corn, then he and his possessions shall be divided among farmers whose corn he has flooded.

59. If any man, without the knowledge of the owner of a garden, fell (caused to fall) a tree in a garden he shall pay half a mina in money

Question #1: These codes suggest that the Babylonian economy was based on what?

Question #2: What are the consequences mentioned for destroying or damaging another person’s property?

Document #2: Code of Hammurabi – Social Classes

199. If a free-born man 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.

202. If a person has struck the cheek of a person who is superior to him, he shall be beaten sixty times with an oxtail whip in the assembly.

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

Question #1: How do the punishments differ for offenses committed against slaves, men of equal rank, and men of superior rank?

Question #2: What do these codes suggest about Babylonian society?
Document #3: Code of Hammurabi – Women

138. If a man wishes to separate from his wife who has borne him no children, he shall give her the amount of her purchase money and the dowry (money or property that a wife’s family gives to her husband when they marry) which she brought from her father’s house, and let her go.

141. If a man’s wife, who lives in his house, wishes to leave it, plunges into debt, tries to ruin her house, neglects her husband, and is judicially convicted: if her husband offer her release, she may go on her way, and he gives her nothing as a gift of release. If her husband does not wish to release her, and if he takes another wife, she shall remain as servant in her husband’s house.

143. If she is not innocent, but leaves her husband, and ruins her house, neglecting her husband, this woman shall be cast into the water.

Question #1: What do these codes reveal about the position of women in Babylonia?

Document #4: Code of Hammurabi – Capital Punishment

1. If a person accused another person and brought a charge of murder against him, but has not proven it, his accuser shall be put to death.

6. If a person stole the property of a church or state, that person shall be put to death; and also the one who received the stolen goods from his hands shall be put to death.

15. If a person has helped either a male or a female slave to escape through the city gate, he shall be put to death.

22. If a person committed robbery and has been caught that person shall be put to death.

229. If a builder constructed a house for a person, but did not make his work strong, with the result that the house which he built collapsed and so caused the death of the owner of the house, that builder shall be put to death.

Question #1: What are the various offenses punishable by death?

Question #2: What does this suggest about Hammurabi’s Code of Law?
Document #5: Code of Hammurabi – Eye for an Eye

196. If a person has destroyed the eye of a member of the aristocracy, they shall destroy his eye.

197. If he has broken another person’s bone, they shall break his bone.

200. If a person has knocked out the tooth of a person of his own rank, they shall knock out his tooth.

Question #1: What is meant by the phrase “eye for an eye”?

Discussion Questions:

1. What did you learn about the Babylonian civilization based on Hammurabi’s Code?

2. Does the effectiveness of Hammurabi’s laws, and the stability that he brought to the Babylonian Empire justify his codes of laws and consequences for violating them? Explain.

Post-Lesson Discussion Questions

The Roman philosopher Tacitus (56 – 120 CE) wrote, “The more corrupt the state, the more numerous the laws.”

1. What did he mean by that?

2. Do you agree with him? Explain

3. Is it ever justified to intentionally break a law?