

The Hammurabi Code

Document:

The Hammurabi Code is one of the oldest known written legal codes, originating in ancient Mesopotamia during the reign of King Hammurabi of Babylon (ca. 1792–1750 BCE). It was inscribed on a basalt stele and placed in public view, signifying both the authority of the king and the transparency of law. This comprehensive legal text outlines 282 laws dealing with civil, criminal, commercial, and family matters. The prologue and epilogue emphasize Hammurabi's divine right to rule and his duty to uphold justice. The code provides a window into Babylonian society, its class divisions, gender roles, and theological underpinnings. Discovered in 1901 at Susa (modern Iran), the code is now housed in the Louvre Museum. It remains a cornerstone for understanding ancient jurisprudence and governance.

Hammurabi was the sixth Amorite king of the Old Babylonian Empire, best known for expanding Babylon throughout the whole of Mesopotamia. Reigning from around 1792 to 1750 BCE, Hammurabi undertook a series of public works projects while consolidating the city-states of Mesopotamia. Uniquely, Hammurabi was honored as a god while still living, leading to his celebration as a conqueror and lawgiver throughout ancient Sumer. The Code of Hammurabi remained celebrated in popular culture even before archaeological discovery.

Bibliography / Primary Sources

Documents:

Code of Hammurabi Stele, basalt monument (ca. 1754 BCE)

Cuneiform Tablets from Old Babylonian Period (ca. 1800–1600 BCE)

Louvre Museum Collection (Stele No. Sb 8, Louvre ID AO 10237)

Translations by L.W. King, Theophile J. Meek, and Martha Roth

Birth Date / Death Date (or Publication Date)

Composed: ca. 1754 BCE

Rediscovered: 1901 (excavated at Susa by Jacques de Morgan)

Publicly Displayed: ca. 18th century BCE in Babylonian temples

Notable / Best-Known For

First major codified set of laws in history

Features the famous principle of *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye”)

Contains laws on marriage, contracts, wages, slavery, theft, and injury

Clearly outlines legal distinctions between free men, commoners, and slaves

Influenced later legal systems, including Biblical law and Roman jurisprudence

Famous Quotes (Expanded)

“To cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil...”

Establishes the divine and moral purpose behind the code.

“If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out.” (Law 196)

A clear example of *lex talionis*, emphasizing equal revenge.

“If a builder builds a house and it collapses, killing the owner, the builder shall be put to death.”
(Law 229)

Demonstrates legal responsibility and liability—an early form of building codes.

Major Works / Textual Contents (Expanded)

The 282 laws are grouped by topic and legal area:

Prologue – Declares Hammurabi’s divine authority from Shamash, the god of justice

Laws 1–5: Legal procedure and perjury

Laws 6–25: Theft, robbery, and economic crime

Laws 26–41: Military service and property rights

Laws 42–88: Agriculture, irrigation, and commerce

Laws 89–126: Business practices and loans

Laws 127–195: Family law: marriage, divorce, paternity, inheritance

Laws 196–214: Bodily injury and medical malpractice

Laws 215–282: Labor law and slavery

Epilogue – Praises Hammurabi’s justice and warns future kings not to alter his words

Influences / Intellectual Context (Expanded)

The code reflects a society structured by divine kingship, class hierarchy, and religious legitimacy. Justice was seen as a god-given order, and law was administered to preserve cosmic balance (*ma’at* in Egyptian terms, though Mesopotamian equivalents existed).

Influences and parallels:

Earlier Sumerian codes (e.g., Ur-Nammu, Lipit-Ishtar)

Later Hebrew law in the Torah (Exodus 20–23; Leviticus)

Roman legal thought (*jus civile* vs. *jus gentium*)

Enlightenment-era concepts of rule of law and codification (e.g., Napoleonic Code)

Legacy and Modern Significance (Expanded)

Legal History: Considered the foundation of modern legal codes

Cultural Symbol: A marker of civilization and law-based governance

Comparative Studies: Regularly analyzed alongside the Mosaic Law

Scholarly Debate: Questions remain about its use—was it practiced law or ideological

monument?

Museums and Education: Featured in legal, historical, and ethical curricula worldwide

Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century Society (Expanded & Factual Entries Only)

1901: Stele unearthed in Susa, Iran by Jacques de Morgan

1902: Louvre Museum acquires and displays the Code of Hammurabi

2003: Included in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register

2006–Present: Required reading in legal theory and ancient history courses (Harvard Law, Yale, LSE)

2019: Louvre digital exhibit launched with high-resolution scans of the stele

(<https://www.louvre.fr/en>

)

Ongoing: Referenced in debates on ancient justice, human rights, and legal universals

Suggested Reading & Resources (Expanded & Formatted)

Secondary Literature (Scholarship)

Roth, Martha T. Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor. Scholars Press, 1997.

ISBN: 9781589832652

Driver, G.R., and Miles, J.C. The Babylonian Laws. Oxford University Press, 1952.

Meek, Theophile J. The Code of Hammurabi. Translated edition, University of Chicago Press.

Van De Mieroop, Marc. King Hammurabi of Babylon: A Biography. Blackwell, 2005. ISBN: 9781405126591

Archival or Online Sources

The Louvre Museum Collection: <https://www.louvre.fr/en>

UNESCO Memory of the World Register – Hammurabi: <https://en.unesco.org/programme/mow>

Digital Hammurabi Project: <https://cdli.ucla.edu>

Livius Ancient History: <https://www.livius.org/articles/person/hammurabi>

The Avalon Project – Yale Law School: <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/ancient/hamframe.asp>