

Ur-Nammu Code

Biography / Overview

The Ur-Nammu Code (or, the Code of Ur-Nammu) is one of the oldest known law codes in history. It was discovered in the ancient city of Ur in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) and dates back to around 2100–2095 BCE during the Third Dynasty of Ur. The code consists of a series of laws inscribed on clay tablets, providing a glimpse into the legal system and societal values of the Sumerian civilization.

Scholars believe that the Ur-Nammu Code was established by Ur-Nammu, the king of Ur, who ruled most parts of ancient Mesopotamia from 2112–2095 BCE. Written in the Sumerian language, the code is significant not only for its antiquity but also for its influence on subsequent legal codes, including the famous Code of Hammurabi. The Ur-Nammu Code explained numerous laws and punishments that aimed to bring justice and order in society. While the complete text of the Ur-Nammu Code has not survived, fragments and copies have been found and studied by archaeologists and historians.

Bibliography / Primary Sources

Roth, Martha T. *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995.

Van De Mieroop, Marc. *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 BC*. 3rd ed., Blackwell, 2016.

Lambert, W.G. “The Historical Development of the Legal Systems of the Ancient Near East.” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 1982, pp. 101–117.

Jacobsen, Thorkild. *The Sumerian King List*. University of Chicago Press, 1939.

Michalowski, Piotr. *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur*. Eisenbrauns, 1989.

Birth Date / Death Date

The Code of Ur-Nammu is believed to have been composed during the reign of King Ur-Nammu, who ruled Ur from approximately 2112 to 2095 BCE. The exact date of composition of the code is difficult to determine precisely due to the fragmentary nature of surviving texts in clay tablets. However, it is generally placed within the early part of Ur-Nammu’s reign, making it

one of the earliest legal codes recorded in history. The Ur-Nammu Code reveals a glimpse of societal structure during Ur's Third Dynasty.

Notable / Best-Known For

The Ur-Nammu Code is best known for being one of the oldest legal codes in human history. It predates the more famous Code of Hammurabi by several centuries and provides valuable insights into the legal and social structure of ancient Sumeria. The code is notable for its focus on justice, fairness, and the protection of vulnerable members of society, such as widows and orphans. It reflects the importance of maintaining order and resolving disputes in a structured manner within Sumerian society.

Some Engraved Laws in the Code of Ur-Nammu

“If a man commits a murder, that man must be killed.”

“If a man breaks a bone of another man, that man's bone shall be broken.”

“If a man knocks out the eye of another man, his eye shall be knocked out.”

“If a man divorces his first-time wife, he shall pay (her) one mina of silver.”

“If the wife of a man followed after another man and he slept with her, they shall slay that woman, but that male shall be set free.”

“If a slave marries a native [i.e., free] person, he/she is to hand the firstborn son over to his owner.”

(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Code_of_Ur-Nammu ,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Istanbul_Archaeology_Museums)

Major Works / Textual Contents

The Ur-Nammu Code consists of a series of laws inscribed on clay tablets that were discovered in the ruins of the ancient city of Ur. While the complete text of the code has not survived, scholars have reconstructed a significant portion of it based on fragments and copies found at various archaeological sites. The laws cover a wide range of topics, including criminal offenses, property rights, marriage and family law, capital offenses, and regulations related to commerce and trade.

Influences / Intellectual Context

Significant Intellectual and Cultural Influences: Reflects a glimpse of ancient Sumerian civilization's structured legal tradition, administrative complexity, and social hierarchy.

Historical and Cultural Context: Composed during the peak of Sumerian civilization, when the city of Ur was a thriving center of culture, trade, and political power in ancient Mesopotamia. The legal system reflected in the code was influenced by the prevailing social and religious beliefs of the time, which helped in maintaining order and justice in ancient Mesopotamia.

Contributions to Fields or Disciplines: Provides insight into ancient Near Eastern jurisprudence, civil law, and societal organization.

Notable Achievements and Recognition: Recognized as the earliest surviving written legal code recorded in history, establishing standards for justice, penalties, and civil responsibilities.

Legacy and Modern Significance

The Ur-Nammu Code has had a lasting legacy in the history of legal systems and jurisprudence, promoting law and social order.

The Ur-Nammu Code influenced the legal codes and traditions of Mesopotamia and helped to lay the foundation for the development of legal codes like Hammurabi's and beyond.

Its emphasis on justice, fairness, and social order influenced subsequent legal traditions in the ancient Near East and provided a template for the codification of laws in other civilizations.

It serves as a key source for scholars, archaeologists, and historians to study the origins of civil and social structure in ancient Mesopotamia.

Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century Society

In 2019, a new translation of the Ur-Nammu Code was published by a team of scholars, shedding new light on the legal principles and social norms of ancient Sumeria.

The Ur-Nammu Code has been the subject of academic conferences and symposia exploring its significance in the history of law and governance.

Digital resources and online databases have made the text of the Ur-Nammu Code more accessible to scholars and researchers interested in ancient legal systems.

Suggested Reading & Resources

Van De Mieroop, Marc. *The Ancient Mesopotamian City*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

Westbrook, Raymond. *Ancient Mesopotamian Law: A Documentary History*. Brill, 2010.

George, Andrew R. *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

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