World Leaders: Hammurabi

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Hammurabi marble relief, located in the chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives in the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Photo from Wikimedia

Synopsis: One of the earliest and most complete ancient legal codes was proclaimed by the Babylonian king Hammurabi, who reigned from 1792 to 1750 B.C. Hammurabi expanded the city-state of Babylon along the Euphrates River to unite all of southern Mesopotamia. His code, a collection of 282 laws and standards, stipulated rules for commercial interactions and set fines and punishments to meet the requirements of justice. Hammurabi’s Code was proclaimed at the end of his reign and carved onto a massive, finger-shaped black stone stela (pillar) that was looted by later invaders and rediscovered in 1901 by a French archaeological team in present-day Iran.

Early Life

Hammurabi was the sixth king in the First Babylonian Dynasty, which ruled in central Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) from circa 1894 to 1595 B.C. His family was descended from the Amorites, a semi-nomadic tribe in western Syria, and his name reflects a mix of cultures: Ammu, which means “family” in Amorite, combined with Rapi, meaning “great” in Akkadian,
the everyday language of Babylon. In the 30th year of his reign, Hammurabi began to expand his kingdom up and down the Euphrates, overthrowing Larsa, Eshunna, Assyria and Mari until all of Mesopotamia was under his sway.

Hammurabi combined his military and political advances with irrigation projects and the construction of fortifications and temples celebrating Babylon’s patron deity Marduk. The Babylon of Hammurabi’s era is now below the water table, and whatever archives he kept are long dissolved, but clay tablets discovered at other ancient sites reveal glimpses of the king’s personality and statecraft. One letter records his complaint of being forced to provide dinner attire for ambassadors from Mari just because he’d done the same for some other delegates: “Do you imagine you can control my palace in the matter of formal wear?”

Hammurabi’s Code

The black stone stela containing Hammurabi’s Code was carved from a single, four-ton slab of diorite, a durable but incredibly difficult stone for carving. At its top is a two-and-a-half-foot relief carving of a standing Hammurabi receiving the law — symbolized by a measuring rod and tape — from the seated Shamash, the Babylonian god of justice. The rest of the 7-foot-5-inch monument is covered with columns of chiseled cuneiform script.

The text, compiled at the end of Hammurabi’s reign, is less a proclamation of legal principles than a collection of precedents set between prose celebrations of Hammurabi’s just and pious rule. The 282 edicts are all written in "if-then" form. For example, if a man steals an ox, he must pay back 30 times its value. The edicts range from family law to professional contracts and administrative law, often outlining different standards of justice for the three classes of Babylonian society — the propertied class, freedmen and slaves. A doctor’s fee for curing a severe wound would be 10 silver shekels for a gentleman, 5 shekels for a freedman and 2 shekels for a slave. Penalties for malpractice followed the same scheme: a doctor who killed a rich patient would have his hands cut off, while only financial restitution was required if the victim was a slave. Hammurabi’s Code provides some of the earliest examples of the doctrine of “An eye for an eye.”

Rediscovery Of Hammurabi’s Code

In 1901, Jacques de Morgan, a French mining engineer, led an archaeological expedition to Persia to excavate the Elamite capital of Susa, more than 250 miles from the center of Hammurabi’s kingdom. There they uncovered the stela—broken into three pieces — that had been brought to Susa as spoils of war, likely by the Elamite king Shutruk-Nahhunte in the mid-12th century B.C. The stela was packed up and shipped to the Louvre in Paris, and within a year it had been translated and widely publicized as the earliest example of a written legal code — one that predated but bore striking parallels to the laws outlined in the Hebrew Old Testament. The 1935 U.S. Supreme Court building features Hammurabi on the marble bas relief of historic lawgivers that lines the south wall of the courtroom.
Although other subsequently-discovered Mesopotamian laws, including the Sumerian “Lipit-Ishtar” and “Ur-Nammu,” predate Hammurabi’s by hundreds of years, Hammurabi’s reputation remains as a pioneering lawgiver who worked — in the words of his monument — “to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak and to see that justice is done to widows and orphans.”
Quiz

1 Which matter is left uncertain in the article?
(A) whether the stela containing Hammurabi's Code was originally brought intact to Susa as spoils of war
(B) whether Hammurabi's Code included both laws and punishments for breaking those laws
(C) whether Hammurabi's Code outlined standards of justice that applied equally across society
(D) whether the laws in Hammurabi's Code bore any resemblance to other ancient laws

2 Read the paragraph from the section "Hammurabi's Code."

The black stone stela containing Hammurabi's Code was carved from a single, four-ton slab of diorite, a durable but incredibly difficult stone for carving. At its top is a two-and-a-half-foot relief carving of a standing Hammurabi receiving the law—symbolized by a measuring rod and tape—from the seated Shamash, the Babylonian god of justice. The rest of the 7-foot-5-inch monument is covered with columns of chiseled cuneiform script.

Which inference is BEST supported by the paragraph?
(A) The Babylonian god of justice was the most important of all Babylonian gods.
(B) Hammurabi was viewed as having a direct relationship with the Babylonian god of justice.
(C) It was rare for information in Babylonian society to be chiseled into stone.
(D) Hammurabi was as highly respected by people as Babylonian gods were.
3 Which option BEST describes the overall structure of the article?

(A) The article begins with background information about the Babylonian king Hammurabi and his leadership, and then provides details about his code of laws.

(B) The article begins with an overview of Hammurabi’s Code, and then explains how it affected the people of Babylonian society.

(C) The article summarizes the accomplishments of the Babylonian king Hammurabi, and then explains how his code of laws has been adopted by other leaders.

(D) The article summarizes key details of Hammurabi’s Code, and then provides a chronological history of events related to the development of the code of laws.

4 How effective is the section “Early Life” in describing Hammurabi’s early life?

(A) Very effective, because it describes how Hammurabi expanded his kingdom in his early years of being king.

(B) Somewhat effective, because it provides information about Mesopotamia, but no information about his childhood and family.

(C) Very effective, because it provides specific information about the cultural origins of his name and gives examples of how he interacted with other powerful leaders.

(D) Somewhat effective, because it provides some information about his background and his rule of Babylon, but no information about his life prior to becoming king.