Chapter 2

The First Empires

The Code of Hammurabi

Although the Code of Hammurabi was not the first collection of laws in Mesopotamia, it is the best known. Like its predecessors, Hammurabi’s code was designed, as described in its prologue, “to promote the welfare of the people… to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong might not oppress the weak.” These excerpts present punishments for different crimes. As you read the selection, think about how personal rank affected punishment.

[Prologue]
When Marduk1 commissioned me to guide the people aright, to direct the land, I established law and justice in the language of the land, thereby promoting the welfare of the people. At that time [I decreed]:

[Trials]
2. If a seignior2 brought a charge of sorcery against a[another] seignior, but has not proved it, the one against whom the charge of sorcery was brought, upon going to the river, shall throw himself into the river, and if the river has then overpowered him, his accuser shall take over his estate; if the river has shown that seignior to be innocent and he has accordingly come forth safe, the one who brought the charge of sorcery against him shall be put to death, while the one who threw himself into the river shall take over the estate of his accuser.
3. If a seignior came forward with false testimony in a case, and has not proved the word which he spoke, if that case was a case involving life, that seignior shall be put to death.

[Victim Rights]
23. If… [a] robber has not been caught, the robbed seignior shall set forth the particulars regarding his lost property in the presence of god, and the city and governor, in whose territory and district the robbery was committed, shall make good to him his lost property.
24. If it was a life [that was lost], the city and governor shall pay one mina3 of silver to his people.

[Assault]
195. If a son has struck his father, they shall cut off his hand.
196. If a seignior has destroyed the eye of a member of the aristocracy, they shall destroy his eye.
198. If he has destroyed the eye of a commoner or broken the bone of a commoner, he shall pay one mina of silver.
199. If he has destroyed the eye of a seignior’s slave or broken the bone of a seignior’s slave, he shall pay one-half his value.
202. If a seignior has struck the cheek of a seignior who is superior to him, he shall be beaten sixty [times] with an oxtail whip in the assembly.
203. If a member of the aristocracy has struck the cheek of a[another] member of the aristocracy who

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1 chief Babylonian god
2 free person of high social standing
3 about one pound
4 the victim’s family
is of the same rank as himself, he shall pay one mina of silver.

204. If a commoner has struck the cheek of another commoner, he shall pay ten shekels\(^5\) of silver.

205. If a seignior’s slave has struck the cheek of a member of the aristocracy, they shall cut off his ear. . . .

209. If a seignior struck another seignior’s daughter and has caused her to have a miscarriage, he shall pay ten shekels of silver for her fetus.

210. If that woman has died, they shall put his daughter to death. . . .

213. If he struck a seignior’s female slave and has caused her to have a miscarriage, he shall pay two shekels of silver.

214. If that female slave has died, he shall pay one-third mina of silver.

\(^5\)about 160 grams


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1. What is the punishment for false accusations of sorcery?

2. How is the punishment for destroying someone’s eye determined?

3. How does the punishment for causing a seignior’s daughter to miscarry differ from the punishment for causing a female slave to miscarry?

4. What do the differences in punishment suggest about personal worth in Babylonian society?
The Rise of Civilization

In the space provided, write the word or phrase next to its definition. Choose your answers from the list below. Some answers will not be used.

Australopithecus  ziggurats  dynasty
silt  monsoons  citadel
papyrus  artifacts  maize
mummification  Homo sapiens  culture

1. Family of rulers in which the right to rule is kept within the family
2. Objects made or altered by humans
3. Paperlike material made from a plant that grew along the Nile
4. Seasonal winds accompanied by rain
5. Most important domesticated plant in Mesoamerica
6. Deposits of mud and sand that made soil rich
7. Temples that were both religious and administrative centers
8. Group of early humans that included Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon
9. Strong central fortress, common in the Harappan civilization
10. Treatment of the body with chemicals so that it remains preserved for centuries

Define the following words or terms.

11. hieroglyphics
12. Ice Age
13. domestication
14. radiocarbon dating
15. Agricultural Revolution
Chapter 2

VOCABULARY ACTIVITY

The First Empires

In the space provided, write the word or phrase next to its definition. Choose your answers from the list below. Some answers will not be used.

calligraphy  monotheism  Nubian dynasty
Rig-Veda  Torah  Sanskrit
linear B  oracle bones  animism
New Kingdom  linear A  varnas

1. Language used in the oldest Indo-European sacred writings
2. Used by Shang priests to foretell the future
3. Period during which Kushite pharaohs ruled Egypt
4. Classes recognized by early Indo-Aryans
5. Form of writing used in Minoan palaces after contact with Indo-European-speaking groups
6. Collection of hymns used in Indian rituals and sacrifices
7. Style of writing that is also an art form
8. Began after the expulsion of the Hyksos
9. Collection of five books that contained the teachings of Moses
10. Belief that all things in nature have a spirit

Define the following words or terms:

11. Mandate of Heaven

12. Diaspora

13. patriarchal

14. Exodus

15. Dark Age