

The Babylonian Empire

I. Background

The Babylonians created the first empire in ancient history. An “empire” is a large political unit or state, usually under a single leader, that controls many people or territories. The Babylonians invaded Mesopotamia and created an empire in 1750 B.C. They were led by King Hammurabi.

II. Social Hierarchy

Each city-state had distinct social classes. The upper class of society consisted of landowners, priests, and soldiers. The middle class of society consisted of craftspeople, traders, and farmers. The lower class of society consisted of slaves. Society was “patriarchal”, or dominated by men. Women had fewer privileges and rights in marriage than did men.

III. Contributions to Civilization

1. Code of Law

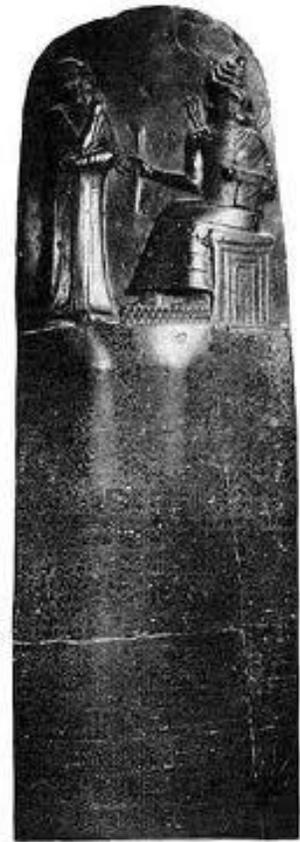
King Hammurabi had 282 laws written on clay tablets. These laws are called the “Code of Hammurabi”, which is the earliest known legal system in the world. The Hammurabi Code was based on a system of strict justice. Penalties for criminal offense were severe and varied according to the social class of the victim. Although these laws favored higher classes over lower ones, they established standards of justice for all classes. It covered almost every occurrence in daily life. Hammurabi’s aim was to ensure order, protect the weak, and fight evil. The law code emphasized the principle of retribution: “an eye of an eye, and a tooth for a tooth”.

2. Astronomy

The Babylonians believed in “astrology”: the superstition that the movement of stars, planets, and other heavenly bodies directly affect the lives of human beings. However, by studying the heavens, the Babylonians learned to recognize planets and predict eclipses, thereby recording data later essential to “astronomy”.

3. Religious Literature

The “Gilgamesh Legends” were poems which described the creation of the world and the building of the ark before the “Great Flood”. These stories resemble those in the “Old Testament”.



Questions to Answer

1. What is an “empire”?
2. What was the “Code of Hammurabi”?
3. What were the main principals of the “Code of Hammurabi”?
4. How did the Babylonians contribute to the study of astronomy?

LAWS FROM THE CODE OF HAMMURABI

- 15: If any one take a male or female slave of the court, or a male or female slave of a freed man, outside the city gates [to escape], he shall be put to death.
- 16: If any one receive into his house a runaway male or female slave of the court, or of a freedman, and does not bring it out at the public proclamation of the [police], the master of the house shall be put to death.
- 53: If any one 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 [grain] which he has caused to be ruined.
- 54: If he be not able to replace the [grain], then he and his possessions shall be divided among the farmers whose corn he has flooded.
- 108: If a [woman wine-seller] does not accept [grain] according to gross weight in payment of drink, but takes money, and the price of the drink is less than that of the corn, she shall be convicted and thrown into the water.
- 109: If conspirators meet in the house of a [woman wine-seller], and these conspirators are not captured and delivered to the court, the [wine-seller] shall be put to death.
- 110: If a "sister of a god"[nun] open a tavern, or enter a tavern to drink, then shall this woman be burned to death.
- 129: If a man's wife be surprised [having intercourse] with another man, both shall be tied and thrown into the water, but the husband may pardon his wife and the king his slaves.
- 130: If a man violate the wife (betrothed or child-wife) of another man, who has never known a man, and still lives in her father's house, and sleep with her and be surprised [caught], this man shall be put to death, but the wife is blameless.
- 131: If a man bring a charge against [his] wife, but she is not surprised with another man, she must take an oath and then may return to her house.
- 132: If the "finger is pointed" at a man's wife about another man, but she is not caught sleeping with the other man, she shall jump into the river for [the sake of her] husband.
- 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 which she brought from her father's house, and let her go.
- 195: If a son strikes his father, his hands shall be [cut] off.
- 196: If a [noble] man put out the eye of another [noble] man, his eye shall be put out
- 197: If he breaks another [noble] man's bone, his bone shall be broken.
- 198: If he put out the eye of a [commoner], or break the bone of a [commoner], he shall pay one [silver] mina.
- 199: If he 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.
- 200: If a man knock out the teeth of his equal, his teeth shall be knocked out.
- 201: If he knocks out the teeth of a [commoner], he shall pay one-third of a [silver] mina.