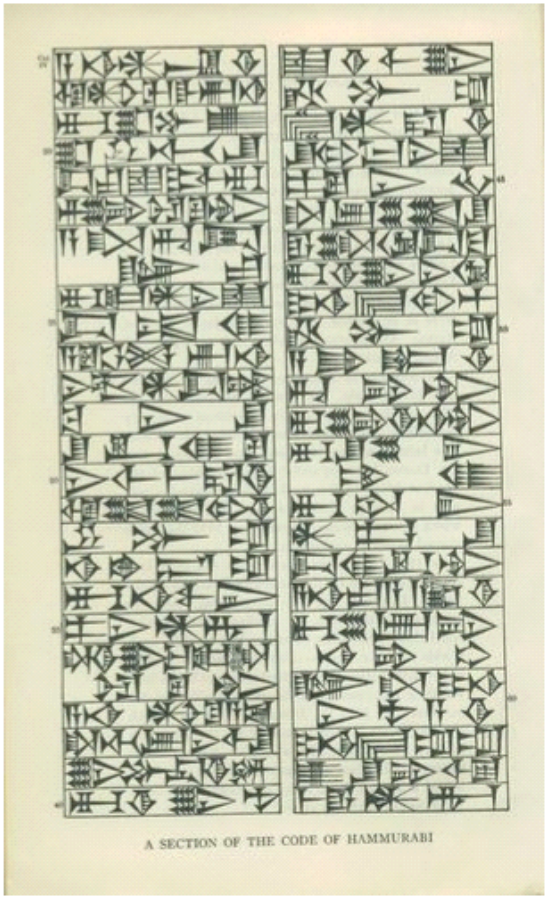
Social Studies Day 1 - The Code of Hammurabi

Thursday, August 28, 2025 4:40 PM

The Code of Hammurabi

by ReadWorks



Section of the Code of Hammurabi

We may take for granted the existence of written laws. Many people grow up with the understanding that certain laws exist. If you fail to stop at a stop sign in your car, you will likely receive a fine. Refusal to pay your taxes can result in a prison sentence. In some states, killing another human being can even result in the death **penalty**.

The U.S. Constitution, the supreme law of the United States of America, was written to ensure that everyone knows the laws of living in this country. Instead of allowing a single ruler to impose his or her will, people are required to follow a set of written laws. Breaking them comes with certain punishments. Based on the code of laws, a judge determines the punishment for a particular **crime**. Committing murder is a much larger **crime** than running a red light. Thus, the punishment for murder is much greater than failing to stop at a red light.

Written laws existed long before the U.S. Constitution. Historians trace the creation of written laws to around 1772 B.C. At that time, what we now consider Iraq was known as Mesopotamia. And the ruler of Mesopotamia was a man named King Hammurabi. Hammurabi was a member of the Babylonian people. He was also a talented military leader and a smart governor. It was he who is credited with

ReadWorks.org · © 2015 ReadWorks®, Inc. All rights reserved.

creating the first written laws.

Hammurabi's Code often required the criminal to receive the same injury that he or she had inflicted on a victim in an effort to make the punishment fit the **crime**. Such laws may seem harsh today, but they were intended to prevent society from descending into chaos and disorder. They helped to advance the rule of law in Mesopotamia.

Hammurabi created 282 laws, which dealt with aspects of everyday life. **Crimes** came with specific **penalties**, and many of them were punishable by death. The laws were **inscribed** on a stone pillar, and became known as Hammurabi's Code. To ensure that everyone knew all 282 laws, they were also probably read aloud in public on a regular basis. That way, no one could be excused for committing a **crime** because of not knowing the law. Laws in the United States function in a similar way. The United States government usually allows people full access to its laws, so the fact that you don't know that running a red light is illegal in the U.S. does not excuse you from paying a fine for doing so.

One of many differences between Hammurabi's Code and the U.S. Constitution is that the laws in Hammurabi's Code often depended on social standing. Soldiers and noblemen had certain rights that ordinary citizens and poor people did not. Still, the existence of laws prevented a future single ruler from imposing his will on the populace.

Hammurabi's Code also dealt with similar issues that we confront in our own justice system today. The laws covered issues related to trade, marriage, taxes, theft, and murder, among other things. To create the code, the king collected laws from different regions of Mesopotamia and compiled them into a single rulebook. If a person was accused of a **crime**, that person would face a judge. This judge would determine whether the accused person was innocent or guilty of the **crime**. If the person was found guilty, then the judge would prescribe the appropriate punishment as written in Hammurabi's Code.

Here's an example of how Hammurabi's Code might have been used in Mesopotamia. Imagine a shepherd is accused of stealing a sheep that was taken from a nobleman's flock. The shepherd and the nobleman are both brought before a judge. The nobleman introduces a witness. The witness claims to have seen the shepherd in the nobleman's field the night before the nobleman realized one of his sheep was missing. Then, the witness says, "The shepherd picked a sheep up and ran off with it in the direction of his own property." The witness is certain it was the same man because she got a good look at the shepherd's face and he was wearing the same hat that he now has on during this "trial." Later, the nobleman points out that the sheep found at the shepherd's place was marked with the nobleman's brand.

In an attempt to defend himself, the shepherd claims he purchased the sheep from a man in town. The shepherd names the man in town, and that man is also brought before the judge. The man says that he has never seen the shepherd and also that he was not selling sheep in the market on the day that the shepherd says he bought the sheep. The man continues to say that he was visiting his daughters. The man's daughters and their husbands act as witnesses and confirm that he was not in the market on said day.

Since the shepherd's story of purchasing a sheep from the marketplace has been cast into doubt by

ReadWorks.org · © 2015 ReadWorks®, Inc. All rights reserved.

witnesses, the judge determines that he is guilty of stealing the sheep. The judge consults Hammurabi's Code.

Law number eight states: "If any one steals cattle or sheep, or a donkey, or a pig or a goat, if it belongs to a god or to the court, the thief shall pay thirtyfold therefor." This means that if a man steals a sheep that's owned by the ruling class in Mesopotamia, he would be required to pay 30 times the amount of the sheep's worth. The law continues: "If they belonged to a freed man of the king he shall pay tenfold; if the thief has nothing with which to pay he shall be put to death." Because the shepherd is found guilty of stealing the sheep from a nobleman and noblemen are considered to be members of the court, the shepherd is required to pay 30 times the cost of the sheep based on the law. According to Hammurabi's Code, if the shepherd does not have enough money to cover his payment, he will be put to death.

Fortunately for the shepherd, he has many other sheep in his flock. He sells 30 of his sheep and pays the nobleman. As a result, the shepherd now has only three sheep left in his flock.

ReadWorks.org · © 2015 ReadWorks®, Inc. All rights reserved.

Vocabulary

crime

noun

definition: something a person does that is against the law.
Driving while drunk is a crime.

Spanish: delito, crimen

inscribe

verb

definition: to write by carving.
They inscribed her name on the tombstone.

Spanish: inscribir, grabar

forms: inscribed, inscribes, inscribing

penalty

noun

definition: a punishment given for breaking a law, rule, or agreement.
The penalty for robbery is usually jail.

Spanish: pena, multa, castigo, recargo

forms: penalties

ReadWorks.org · © 2025 ReadWorks®, Inc. All rights reserved.
Definitions and sample sentences within definitions are provided by Wordsmyth. © 2025 Wordsmyth. All rights reserved.

1. Before you start reading...

Here are the vocabulary words that will be in this reading. Let's see how well you already know them.

Check the box that shows how well you know each word. It's ok if you don't know them yet (this is not graded)!

	Don't know it	Have heard of it but not sure of its meaning	Know something about its meaning	Know it well
inscribe				
penalty				

---

2. Word Builder

Words are made of smaller parts that are called syllables. Some words have one syllable, but many have two or more. Draw lines to show how the syllables build each vocabulary word.

pen in ty scribe al

1. _____ 2. _____

---

3. After reading and exploring the words through some activities...

Do you know these words better? Check the box that shows how well you know each word. It's ok if you don't know them yet (this is not graded)!

	Don't know it	Have heard of it but not sure of its meaning	Know something about its meaning	Know it well
inscribe				
penalty				

ReadWorks.org · © 2025 ReadWorks®, Inc. All rights reserved.
Vocabulary powered by WordSmyth. © 2025 Wordsmyth. All rights reserved.

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

1. What is Hammurabi's Code?

A. a collection of 282 laws believed to be the first written laws

B. a group of soldiers and noblemen who lived in ancient Mesopotamia

C. the ancient idea that a punishment should fit the crime

D. the punishment for stealing sheep from a nobleman in ancient Mesopotamia

2. What does this passage describe?

A. the origin and meaning of the word "judge"

B. what Mesopotamian society was like before written law

C. the life and death of the Mesopotamian King Hammurabi

D. the function and influence of the first written laws

3. Read these sentences from the text.

In an effort to make the punishment fit the crime, Hammurabi's Code often required the criminal to receive the same injury that he or she had inflicted on a victim. Such laws may seem harsh today, but they were intended to prevent society from descending into chaos and disorder.

Based on this evidence, what might King Hammurabi have wanted to promote in society?

A. chaos and confusion

B. justice and order

C. anger and violence

D. wealth and fortune

4. How might Hammurabi's Code have prevented a single ruler from imposing, or forcing, his or her will on people?

A. by convincing the public that a ruler always wants what is best for the people

B. by punishing a ruler for trying to change the Code

C. by forcing a ruler to get people to agree on a new law before adding it to the Code

D. by preventing the ruler from making up new laws that were not mentioned in the Code

ReadWorks.org · © 2025 ReadWorks®, Inc. All rights reserved.

5. What is the main idea of this text?

A. In the time of Hammurabi's Code, it was illegal for a shepherd to steal a sheep from the flock of a nobleman.

B. The U.S. Constitution is mostly based on the ideas and laws mentioned in Hammurabi's Code.

C. Hammurabi's code and the U.S. Constitution differ in that the laws in Hammurabi's Code often depended on social standing.

D. Hammurabi's Code was the first collection of written law and advanced the rule of law in Mesopotamia.

6. Why might the author have described the imaginary trial of the shepherd who stole the nobleman's sheep?

A. to show that the shepherd did not commit the crime of which he was accused

B. to show that a single ruler could impose his or her will on other people

C. to show how Hammurabi's Code might apply to a specific situation

D. to convince the reader that Hammurabi's Code was unfair in its punishments

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

All 282 laws of Hammurabi's Code were also probably read aloud in public on a regular basis _____ no one could be excused for committing a crime because of not knowing the law.

A. although

B. however

C. above all

D. so that

8. What does law number eight of Hammurabi's Code describe the punishment for?

9. In the example of the trial of the shepherd, how did the judge determine the shepherd's punishment for stealing the nobleman's sheep?

10. Why is it important for laws to be written down? Support your answer with at least two pieces of evidence from the text.

ReadWorks.org · © 2025 ReadWorks®, Inc. All rights reserved.