

Hammurabi's Code

Central Historical Question:

What can we learn about Babylonia from Hammurabi's Code?

Materials:

- Background PowerPoint
- Copies of Documents A-C
- Modeling Script for Document A
- Guiding Questions

Plan of Instruction:

1. This lesson focuses on the skill of evaluating evidence. Students will be asked to consider the strengths and limitations of different pieces of historical evidence. Although not necessary, it may be helpful to have completed some of the introductory *Reading Like a Historian* lessons that ask students to evaluate different accounts. If students have completed one or more of those exercises, you can explain that in this lesson they will be doing something similar but with excerpts from Hammurabi's Code.
2. Show background PowerPoint on evaluating evidence and Hammurabi's Code. Be sure to emphasize the following points:
 - a. Slide 1: Title slide. *Hammurabi's Code is one of the oldest law codes in the world, dating back to the 1700s BCE. This makes it close to 4,000 years old. The laws in Hammurabi's Code can help us learn about Babylonia.*
 - b. Slide 2: Evaluating Evidence. *What does it mean to evaluate evidence? As historians, we try to understand what happened in the past by looking at different accounts about the past. For each account that we examine, we need to consider what useful information it provides about the time period that we are studying. We also need to remember that one account is never enough information to understand what happened in the past. That means that we must consider the limitations of each document that we examine and think about what other information we might need.*
 - c. Slide 3: Who was Hammurabi? *Hammurabi was a member of the Amorite dynasty who united all of Mesopotamia under the Babylonian Empire. He became king of Babylon in 1792 BCE and ruled until 1750 BCE.*
 - d. Slide 4: Hammurabi's Code. *Hammurabi is most famous for his law code, which is one of the oldest in the world. It is a list of 282 laws that deal with many different parts of society. The code was created in part to help unify a quickly expanding empire. In this law code, the government set up certain punishments for crimes so "that the strong might not injure the weak." Before this code, individuals basically decided how they wanted to take revenge on people who hurt them. Hammurabi's Code made rules*

more standardized so that everyone would know the crimes and penalties, similar to the way everyone knows school rules.

- e. Slide 5: What does it look like? *Various copies of Hammurabi's Code have been unearthed. Most are inscriptions on baked clay tablets. The most well known surviving copy is an inscription on a stone slab called a stela. It is about 7 feet high, 2.5 feet across, and 1.5 feet thick at the base. At the top there is a relief, or image, of Hammurabi and the god Shamash. The laws are written on the stela vertically and read from right to left.*
- f. Slide 6: Loss and Unearthing. *In the 12th century BCE, the king of Elam (located in present-day Iran) took the stela. Like many artifacts, it was eventually lost. In 1901, French archeologists unearthed the stela in Susa, Iran. They then took it to France. It is now housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris.*

Note: You may wish to point out Susa on the right edge of the map and Babylon, the capital of Babylonia, in the map's center.
- g. Slide 7: Central Historical Question. *Like detectives, historians use the evidence they find to decide what life was like in the past. Today we are going to answer the question: What can we learn about Babylonia from Hammurabi's Code?*

3. Document A: Religion in Hammurabi's Code

- a. Tell students that the first clue we have about life in Babylonia is a selection from Hammurabi's Code focusing on religion.
- b. Pass out Document A, but do not pass out the Guiding Questions yet.
- c. Have students listen as you model reading the document. Some key points are included in the modeling script.
- d. After modeling the document, you may want to have the class answer the Guiding Questions for Document A as a way to review the key points you modeled. You could also give students a copy of the modeling script instead.

4. Document B: Economics in Hammurabi's Code

- a. Explain to students that they are now going to get another clue about life in Babylonia. They are going to read a selection from Hammurabi's Code that focuses on how people made money.
- b. Pass out Document B and have students read the document and complete the questions in pairs.
- c. Discuss: What might Hammurabi's Code teach us about economics in Babylonia?
 - i. *The series of laws on farming, dams and gardens suggests the land was very important to people. Babylonia seems like an agricultural society and people might have made their money farming the land, not working in big cities.*
 - ii. *This document also hints at slavery in Babylonia because a man and his possessions would be divided up if he couldn't repay the damage done from his dam.*

5. Document C: Society in Hammurabi's Code

- a. Explain to students that they are going to see one last clue from Hammurabi's Code that might help them learn about life in Babylonia. This clue focuses on how society was structured. They should focus on whether all people seemed equal. If not, who had more power? Were there slaves in this society?
- b. Pass out Document C and have students read and complete the questions in pairs.
- c. Discuss:
 - i. *It seems as though not everyone was equal in Babylonia. This society probably had slaves because the code mentions different rules for slaves.*
 - ii. *Women and children could be sold in order to repay a debt. However, they only had to work for three years before they would regain their freedom.*
 - iii. *The fact that women would keep their dowries if their husbands left them suggests that women had some rights in Babylonian society.*
 - iv. *It seems as though not everyone's "eye" was considered equal. Laws 196-198 show us that the eye of "another man" was probably worth more than the eye of a free man or a slave. If you put out the eye of another man, you had to pay with your own eye. If you put out the eye of a free man, you had to pay a fine. A slave's eye was worth the least because you could just pay half the fine. If different people's eyes were not valued equally, then these different groups of people were likely in unequal social classes.*
 - v. **Note:** The three classes in Babylonia were the amelu, the muskinu and the ardu. The amelu were in the highest class and "another man" refers to this class. The muskinu were free people who were probably poor or landless. The slaves were the lowest class and were considered property. However, they could also own their own property, even their own slaves, and could buy their freedom.

6. Summary

After reading the documents and reviewing the Guiding Questions have students answer the Central Historical Question by completing the summary section of the Guiding Questions.

7. Final Discussion

- a. Review: What have we learned about Babylonia from Hammurabi's Code?
- b. Do we know if people actually followed Hammurabi's Code?
- c. The Code says that it was created so "*that the strong might not injure the weak.*" Given the sections we've read, does this seem accurate?
- d. What might be a problem with using Hammurabi's Code to learn about Babylonia?

- e. When studying history, we don't want to use only one document, or piece of evidence. Multiple pieces of evidence from several different documents can give us more information about what life was like in the past. What other pieces of evidence might we use to learn what life was like in Babylonia?
- f. This would be an excellent opportunity to read a selection from the class textbook on life in Babylonia or some other source on the topic. Students could then corroborate what they learned from Hammurabi's Code.

Citation:

"Code of Hammurabi," in "Internet History Sourcebooks," Fordham University.
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/hamcode.asp>.

Modeling Script

1. **Intro.** *Historians are like detectives. They use the evidence they find to try to piece together what happened in the past. Often, when they are studying ancient history, there is not a lot of evidence to use. What could we learn about Babylonia from this section of Hammurabi's Code? I'll also be paying attention to the limitations of this document because one source is never enough to understand what happened in the past.*

2. *I see several names here: Anu, Bel, Marduk & Ea. It seems like they were all gods. This suggests that Babylonians were polytheistic, or believed in more than one god.*

3. *Hammurabi says the gods Anu & Bel called his name and told him he would rule Babylon. This makes me think that Babylonians might have believed their rulers got their powers from the gods.*

4. **“...to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak”:** *This seems like a goal of the Code. Hammurabi says he wants his laws to protect the weak and the oppressed.*

3. **End of document.** *Just from this one section of the Code I'm able to learn some things about Babylonia. However, I know that I can't use this document by itself to draw conclusions about Babylonia. I will need to look at other accounts about Babylonia to corroborate what I am reading here.*

Document A: Hammurabi's Code – Religion

The following selection is from the introduction of Hammurabi's Code. As you read, pay attention to the religion of Babylonia. What did people believe in? Who were their gods?

When Anu the **Sublime** . . . and Bel, the lord of Heaven and earth, who **decreed** the fate of the land, assigned to Marduk, the over-ruling son of Ea, God of righteousness, power over earthly man, and made him great . . . they called Babylon by his celebrated name, made it great on earth, and founded an everlasting kingdom in it. Then Anu and Bel called by name me, Hammurabi, the **exalted** prince, who feared God, to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak; so that I should rule over the black-headed people like Shamash, and enlighten the land, to further the well-being of mankind.

Source: “Code of Hammurabi,” 1780 BCE.

Document A: Hammurabi's Code—Religion (Modified)

The following selection is from the introduction of Hammurabi's Code. As you read, pay attention to the religion of Babylonia. What did people believe in? Who were their gods?

When Anu the **Sublime** . . . and Bel, the lord of Heaven and earth, who **decreed** the fate of the land, assigned to Marduk, the over-ruling son of Ea, God of righteousness, power over earthly man, and made him great . . . they called Babylon by his celebrated name, made it great on earth, and founded an everlasting kingdom in it. Then Anu and Bel called by name me, Hammurabi, the **exalted** prince, who feared God, to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak; so that I should rule over the black-headed people like Shamash, and enlighten the land, to further the well-being of mankind.

Source: "Code of Hammurabi," 1780 BCE.

Vocabulary

sublime: greatest

decreed: ordered

exalted: highly thought of, grand

Document B: Hammurabi's Code—Economy

The following selections from Hammurabi's Code discuss the economy in Babylonia. As you read, pay attention to what was important to Babylonians as they tried to make a living.

42. If any one take over a field to **till** it, and obtain no harvest from it, it must be proved that he did no work on the field, and he must deliver grain, just as his neighbor raised, to the owner of the field.

43. If he do not till the field, but let it lie **fallow**, he shall give grain like his neighbor's to the owner of the field, and the field which he let lie fallow he must plow and sow and return to its owner.

53. If any one be too lazy to keep his dam in proper condition . . . 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 corn which he has caused to be ruined.

54. If he be not able to replace the corn, then he and his possessions shall be divided among the farmers whose corn he has flooded.

59. If any man, without the knowledge of the owner of a garden, **fell** a tree in a garden he shall pay half a mina in money.

Source: "Code of Hammurabi," 1780 BCE.

Vocabulary

till: farm, work

fallow: land with no seeds planted

fell: cause to fall

Document C: Hammurabi's Code—Society

The following selections from Hammurabi's Code discuss rules for Babylonian society. As you read, pay attention to how society was structured. Was everyone treated equally?

117. If any one fails to pay a debt, and sells himself, his wife, his son, or daughter for money or give them away for forced labor: they shall work for three years in the house of the man who bought them and in the fourth year they shall be set free.

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.

196. If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out.

198. If he put out the eye of a freed man, or break the bone of a freed man, he shall pay one gold 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.

202. If any one strike the body of a man higher in rank than he, he shall receive sixty blows with an ox-whip in public.

203. If a free-born man strike the body of another free-born man or equal rank, he shall pay one gold mina.

Source: "Code of Hammurabi," 1780 BCE.

Vocabulary

dowry: money or property that a wife's family gives to her husband when they marry

Guiding Questions

Central Historical Question:

What can we learn about Babylonia from Hammurabi's Code?

Document A: Religion

1. According to this document, where did Hammurabi get his power as king?
2. Monotheistic or Polytheistic?
 - a. According to this document, was Babylonia a monotheistic society (belief in one god) or a polytheistic society (belief in many gods)?
 - b. How do you know this from Hammurabi's Code?
3. According to this document, what is the goal of Hammurabi's Code?

Document B: Economy

1. Working the fields: Summarize laws 42-43 in your own words.
2. The dams: Summarize laws 53-54 in your own words.
3. Type of Economy
 - a. According to this document, do you think most people in Babylonia made money in cities or in the country?
 - b. How do you know this from Hammurabi's Code?

Document C: Society

1. Laws 196-199 discuss putting out the eye of “another man,” a “free man” and a “slave.”

a. According to this document, whose eye was worth the most?

b. According to this document, whose eye was worth the least?

c. How do you know?

2. Equality

a. According to this document, was everyone equal in Babylonia?

b. How do you know this from Hammurabi’s Code?

i. Evidence 1:

ii. Evidence 2:

3. Women

a. According to law 138, what happens to a dowry if a man leaves his wife?

b. What does this suggest about the position of women in Babylonian society?

Summary

What are some of the limitations of Hammurabi's Code as evidence of life in Babylonia?

What other sources might help us to better understand life in Babylonia?

Use evidence from the historical documents you read to answer the central historical question by completing the sentences below:

What can we learn about Babylonia from Hammurabi's Code?

Historians can learn a lot about Babylonia from Hammurabi's Code. According to the Code, Babylonian religion was _____

According to the Code, the Babylonian economy was based on _____

According to the Code, Babylonian society was structured around _____
