
An example of ancient civic duty: public knowledge of the laws, the Hammurabi Code

During the Babylonian Empire the most notable ruler was Hammurabi. The Babylonian Empire began when pastoral nomads from Arabia came to Mesopotamia through modern day Syria searching for grazing lands for their herds. The Babylonian Empire's capital was the city of Babylonia on the Euphrates River. Hammurabi ruled Babylonia from 1792-1750 BCE. While in power he built, "fortifications, temples, immigration channels, and dams that could cut off water to potential enemies downstream" (28). Though Hammurabi made many advances in Babylonian society his most important achievement was his code. Hammurabi's Code was a code carved on a black stone pillar and placed in a public temple to promote public knowledge of laws. Hammurabi's Code allows historians understand society's main concerns at the time. Historians can safely assume that not everyone follows all the laws because if they did, then there would be no need for the law in the first place. Therefore by looking at this set of laws historians can learn about Mesopotamian society.

Hammurabi's Code has two hundred and eighty-two articles that mostly assign punishments for breaking laws. It is a compilation of earlier Mesopotamian laws written down for public knowledge. The code regulates: contracts and trades, marriage and adultery, debts and estates, and relations among social classes. Some of the penalties that the code assigns are based on retribution. The penalties attempt to avoid crimes as well as limit retribution by ensuring that the penalty for a crime is equal to the crime. By reading Hammurabi's Code, historians can identify what the people of Mesopotamia valued and held important. They show what was important enough to make a law referring to it and what is more important than other things by the harshness of the punishment. Therefore historians can figure out what they valued as well as what was valued more than others.

The insights to society that are offered by the code shows four ideas as to what daily life in Babylonia was like. First off, it shows Babylonian society as hierarchical by showing different penalties (for the same crime) based on social class. Second, the code shows how property rights were highly valued by the Babylonian citizens. Next, it portrays the difference in gender in Babylonia. How the society is patriarchal but women did have some rights. And lastly, the code shows how the people thought about moral issues. For example, they believed in "an eye for an eye". Meaning that Babylonian citizens viewed punishments as needing to be equal for their crime rather than compassionate towards the criminal. From reading these groups of laws we learn about what the social structure and important societal regulations that express the most important things within their culture.

Society in Babylonia was hierarchical. The code reveals that at the top of society was nobles, followed by commoners, and then slaves. The code shows us this by acknowledging different punishments for the same crime for people of different social classes. For example, "If an awilu [highest class] should blind the eye of another awilu, they shall blind his eye" (56) but if, "he should blind the eye of a commoner or break the bond of a commoner, he shall weigh and deliver 60 shekels of silver" (56). This excerpt shows that, if a high class person commits the same crime as a lower class person, there is a different punishment. And these different punishments are assigned based on the class of the victim. By having the punishment worse

when the noble has a crime against another noble, the Code shows that the higher you are in social class the more you are protected by the law.

In Babylonian society property rights were highly valued. The code shows us this by stating, "If a man breaks into a house, they shall kill him and hang him front of that very breach" (54). Citizens in Babylonia hold property rights to a high value if they are willing to kill a person for breaking into their home. They punish theft and robbery with death which shows that possessions that belonged to someone were very important to their owner and one of the worst things you could do was take their possessions from them. In our society and culture, death as a punishment for robbery or theft too many people is a very harsh punishment. Our society may see this is too harsh and therefore we send people to prison rather than killing them for theft. Because of this historians can conclude that property was of very high importance to people in Mesopotamia.

Like many other societies that emerged before or at the same time, the Babylonians had a patriarchal system. We know this by acknowledging that men had more rights than women. For example, women could not divorce their husband without just reason but men could have a second wife if their wife could not bear children. And, "if a man's wife should be seized lying with another male, they shall bind them and cast them into the water" (55). By noting that if a woman cheated they could be killed but a man could have two wives, historians can conclude that the Babylonians were patriarchal. Although we can learn about how Babylonia was a patriarchal society we can also learn that women had rights as well. For example, "If a woman repudiates her husband, and declares, 'You will not have marital relations with me' – her circumstances shall be investigated by the authorities of her city quarter" (55). We know that women were able to accuse their husband of not doing what they were supposed to and it would be taken seriously and investigated. By reading Hammurabi's Code we can learn about how men controlled society but women still were allowed their rights.

The last thing that Hammurabi's Code tells us about is what the Babylonians thought of the notion of justice. Hammurabi's Code lays down the expression, "an eye for an eye" (56). By reading this law in the codes we can tell that Babylonian society believed that it was okay to punish a person's act by causing them the same pain. For example, when talking about a building being not built to standards and killing someone, "if it should cause the death of a son of the householder, they shall kill a son of that builder" (56). This shows the extent in which Babylonians accept retribution. It expresses the strength in their belief in justice.

By reading Hammurabi's Code we can understand what Babylonian society was like when these laws were written. We can safely assume that these laws show Mesopotamia's main concerns in society. The laws would not have to be made if people were not performing the illegal act therefore the law would be needed. But it is also not safe to assume that every law was strictly enforced by the government. Historians must assume that some laws, just like today, were not enforced. And that just because it is written down as a law, does not mean this is what people really lived by, but more what they thought they should live by. By analyzing the laws written in Hammurabi's Code we can more thoroughly understand the social structure and ideals that people truly found important.