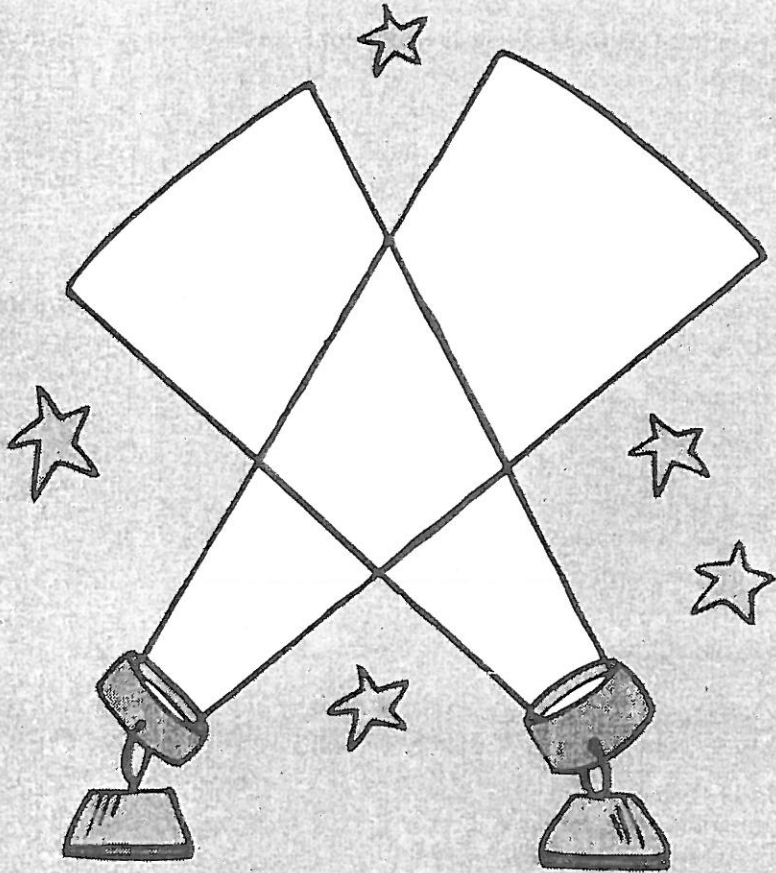


READERS' THEATER



HAMMURABI'S LAW

BACKGROUND: HAMMURABI'S LAW

Babylon

The first city-states in history developed in Mesopotamia in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that flow into the Persian Gulf. There were many rulers and a great deal of conflict as various tribes tried to control the land that is today known as Iraq. Over many years, Babylon came to dominate the southern half of this area under a succession of rulers. In 1792 B.C. Hammurabi came to power in Babylon as the sixth ruler in a dynasty founded around 100 years before he became king.

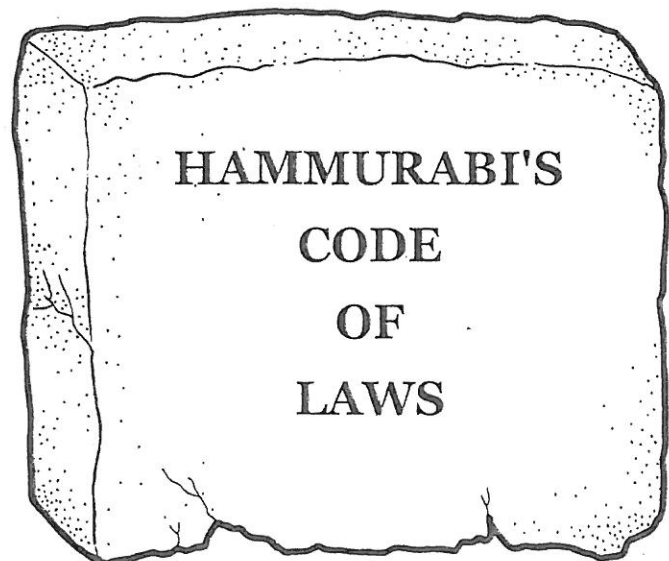
Hammurabi

During the long reign of Hammurabi, from 1792 B.C. to 1750 B.C., the Babylonian empire was created as he defeated the many rivals for power from neighboring peoples. The peace he imposed led to successful years of bumper crops and increased trade among cities under his control. Merchants traveled to many lands trading grain and cloth for lumber, gold, gems, and livestock. The sciences, arts, medicine, poetry, literature, and education all flourished under his leadership. Mathematics developed with such inventions as square roots and cubic roots and a complex numbering system. Food was stored during years of plenty and used during years of drought and crop failure. Peace brought prosperity for many residents.

Hammurabi's Code of Laws

Toward the end of his rule, Hammurabi decided to issue a written code of laws, based on the customs and laws of his people, to which all citizens and residents would be able to refer. He had about 282 laws engraved on pillars in a temple in Babylon and available to be read by all. This is the first written code of laws in human history of which we have a record. The laws were designed to convey a sense of justice and equality based on social status and wealth.

The laws were remarkable in their detail and even protected the rights of women and slaves to a certain extent. Married Babylonian women even retained some control over their property and their persons. Slaves were permitted to earn wages after working for their owners, could own property, and buy their own freedom. Hammurabi's laws reflected the harsh realities of life in primitive nations, but they were the basis of future legal systems.



SCRIPT SUMMARY: HAMMURABI'S LAW

The setting for this script is a temple courtyard in Babylon a few years before 1750 B.C. The herald reads the laws of the kingdom that have been codified and inscribed on stone. The first law sets the tone for this ancient legal system that is an eye for an eye, a bone for a bone. If a pregnant woman is struck, loses the baby, and dies herself, the daughter of the person who struck the woman would be killed. Other punishments for serious crimes such as theft or murder, involve being thrown into a fire or being impaled (stabbed). The laws detail punishments involved for a wife embarrassing her husband, a son striking a father, and women entering a tavern.

The point of view of a merchant, a potter, a farmer, two wives, and a young man are expressed as various laws are read. The different status of free men and slaves is clear from the punishments. This is a society dependent upon slavery, and the speakers make clear their recognition of the dangers of slavery and their own fears of slave resistance. The narrator points out at the end of the script that Babylon was defeated by other nations soon after the death of Hammurabi.

Assignment

Read the readers' theater script "Hammurabi's Law." Prepare for the performances and share your interpretations of the scripts with the class.

Extensions: Writing and Literature

- Write a script based on Hammurabi's Laws. Use the background section, biographies, textbooks, and Internet sources for help. You can find a complete list of Hammurabi's laws on the Internet.
- Write a commentary or script of the laws from the viewpoint of a modern woman listening to the laws about women's rights and obligations.
- Write a commentary or script of the laws from the point of view of a slave (male or female) listening to the laws about the rights and obligations of slaves.
- Write a script rewriting the laws of Hammurabi from the viewpoint of today's life and culture.
- Imagine that you live in the time of Hammurabi. Create a script in which one of these laws plays a part in your life. You might be a citizen, a slave, a judge, a child, a farmer, a young married woman, or a thief.
- Read any biography of Hammurabi. Use one episode or a chapter as the basis for a readers' theater script about his life. After practicing your script, share your performance with the rest of the class.



SCRIPT: HAMMURABI'S LAW

This script is set in Babylon during the reign of Hammurabi from 1792 B.C. to 1750 B.C. Hammurabi was a very competent king famous for having 282 basic laws of his kingdom carved into circular stone pillars. This script imagines the reading of the laws and reactions of various residents in the three classes of his kingdom: wealthy landowners and merchants, common workers and craftsmen, and slaves. There are eight speakers.

Narrator: Many people have crowded into a temple courtyard in central Babylon to hear the proclamation of the code of laws issued by Hammurabi. These laws are engraved on stone pillars to be read by the people. The laws are based on custom and tradition and are not new to the nation, but they were written so that all residents might have justice under law.

Herald: Hammurabi, the supreme leader in the world, has been instructed by the gods to make justice appear in the world and to destroy evil and the wicked so that the strong will not oppress the weak. His law will rise like the sun god to give light to the land.

Young Man: Our great leader is not a shy ruler, is he?

Herald: If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out. If he breaks the bone of another man, his bone shall be broken. If he knocks out the teeth of his equal, his teeth shall be knocked out.

Merchant: That is perfectly fair and proper.

Herald: If a man strikes a free-born pregnant woman so that her child dies, he shall pay ten gold coins for her loss. If the woman dies, his daughter shall be put to death.

Potter's Wife: Notice that the women still lose.

Herald: A builder who sells a poorly constructed house that collapses and kills the buyer may be put to death. If the house collapses and kills the owner's son, the builder's son may be put to death.

Merchant: That ought to keep some of these dishonest builders from selling cheap death traps. The executions should be public to set an example for other builders.



SCRIPT: HAMMURABI'S LAW (cont.)

- Herald:** If a wife's bad behavior embarrasses her husband in public, he can be rid of her. If his claim is proven in court, he may divorce her and marry another woman. The first wife will then have the status of a household slave girl.
- Merchant:** Indeed, the women in this society are getting far too bossy and difficult. This should keep them in their place.
- Potter:** I will be sure to inform my wife of this new law. She complains as loudly as a fishwife. It's embarrassing, although she has been complaining and even worse, arguing, all of our married life.
- Potter's Wife:** What about his bad behavior—chasing slave girls or getting drunk?
- Farmer's Wife:** What good is a husband whose wife doesn't keep him in line?
- Herald:** If the wife of one man is unfaithful and arranges the murder of her husband and his wife, both the wife and the other man shall be impaled.
- Potter:** This is both fair and sensible. Otherwise, wives will be too tempted to seek the comfort of other men whenever their husbands ignore them.
- Potter's Wife:** Husbands could, of course, pay attention to their own wives and avoid the whole problem.
- Herald:** If an immoral woman opens a tavern or drinks in a tavern, this woman shall be burned to death. If a man's wife is accused of adultery but the charge is not proven, she shall jump into the river for her husband's honor.
- Potter's Wife:** Humph! I don't hear any law against men drinking or chasing other women.
- Herald:** If a son strikes his father, his hand may be cut off. If a slave strikes a free man, his ear may be cut off.
- Young Man:** You will notice that, according to this law, a son is little better than a slave.



SCRIPT: HMMURABIS LAW (cont.)

- Herald:** A man may leave property to his wife, but she may not sell the property. She must leave it to her sons.
- Young Man:** That is a very good law. It will keep a widow from wasting money on herself or getting married again.
- Herald:** A husband cannot divorce a sickly wife because of her illness. He is required to care for her in his home the rest of her life. But if a wife chooses to leave, she is free to leave and may take her dowry with her.
- Farmer's Wife:** That's at least fair to the wife.
- Potter's Wife:** It wouldn't have done me any good. My husband wasted my dowry the first year of our marriage on wine and gambling.
- Herald:** If a woman is disgraced in public by her husband and her accusations are proven in court, she can leave her husband and take her dowry.
- Farmer's Wife:** How are you going to prove you are disgraced in court without being even more embarrassed? I couldn't have lived on my meager dowry in any case.
- Herald:** If someone helps put out a fire and steals valuables from the burned building, the looter may be thrown into the fire.
- Merchant:** A very sensible and just ruling. Theft must always be punished.
- Herald:** If a farmer is unable to pay interest on a debt because of a crop failure or drought, the farmer may be excused from his debt that year.
- Farmer:** This is fair. Farming is a tough business, always dependent upon the weather and good luck.
- Merchant:** If you ask me, that just allows a farmer to squeeze out of his rightful debt. He should have to pay double interest next year.



SCRIPT: HAMMURABI'S LAW (cont.)

Herald: If a slave strikes the body of a freeman, he shall receive 60 blows from an ox-whip in public.

Merchant: Slaves must be kept under control, or the whole country will fall to enemies in our own nation.

Herald: Someone who steals another person's slave, or hides a runaway slave intending to keep that slave as his own, may be put to death.

Potter: This will put an end to slave girls falling in love with young fools. They can both be properly punished.

Merchant: Indeed, you are right. Without slavery, our society would be much weaker. We would produce fewer goods and be less able to protect ourselves from enemies who would destroy Babylon and make us their slaves.

Farmer: But the slaves are here, and they hate us for our cruelty.

Merchant: Life is hard. Slavery is a reality of life. It is better to own slaves than to be slaves.

Potter: That is true, but life hangs on the threads of chance and the fickleness of the gods. It might not hurt to show kindness to the oppressed or at least treat the slave as a fellow human being.

Merchant: Kindness is weakness. Any enemy—any slave—will sense weakness, and then we will wear the brand and the yoke of slavery.

Herald: To the end of days, forever, may the king who happens to be in the land observe the words of justice that are inscribed here. The oppressed man shall read this writing, and he shall find his rights engraved in stone.

Narrator: The kingdom of Babylon barely survived the death of Hammurabi. Revolts within the kingdom were not defeated by his son, and invaders conquered the land. The stone pillars with the laws have survived as the first written account of an ancient people's code of laws governing all facets of life.



READER'S RESPONSE: HAMMURABI'S LAW

Directions

- These discussion activities and questions may be used in small groups or with the entire class. They may also be used by the actors as a part of their preparation for the reading.
- Refer to the script "Hammurabi's Law" when responding to all questions. Find useful facts in the background section, biographies, textbooks, and Internet sources.
- Make notes on the lines provided below each question before your group discussion.

General Discussion

1. Which of Hammurabi's laws was the most unfair? Explain your choice.

2. Which of Hammurabi's laws was the most reasonable? Why?

3. Why do you think the punishments were so severe in some cases?

4. What group or class of people were the most favored and protected by the code of laws? Explain your choice.

5. What group or class of people were least protected and least favored under the code of Hammurabi?

Making It Personal

How would you feel if you lived under the code of laws in Hammurabi's Babylon?

Slavery was very common in the ancient world. Why do you think it existed? Why have most societies and cultures eliminated slavery today?
