

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 your analysis of 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 at this time 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. The "eye for an eye" punishment described in code 196 can be seen as an attempt to promote "equality" among free-born men. The punishment took an equal amount from the person who harmed another.
 - ii. However, code 199 suggests significant inequality in Babylonian society. It provides evidence of slavery and it establishes a much harsher penalty for harming a free person than for harming an enslaved person. (Note: The three classes in Babylonia were the amelu, the muskinu and the ardu. The amelu were in the highest class and "another man" in code 196 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.)
 - iii. Other evidence of inequality:
 1. A man could sell women and children into servitude to pay a debt (code 117).
 2. A man could separate from a woman by paying back the dowry and "purchase money" (code 138) but a woman could only separate if her husband allowed her release (code 141).
 3. The punishment for striking the body of a person from a higher social class was severe public whipping (code 202), while a free-born man would only pay a monetary fine for striking the body of another free-born man (code 203).
 - iv. The codes outline an inferior social position for women. Code 117 suggests that men may have been able to sell their wives into forced labor to repay a debt. Codes 138 and 141 suggest significant gender inequality in marriage. Men had the power to end a marriage with limited consequences, while women were beholden to the permission of men if they wanted to leave a marriage. However, the codes also suggest that women had some rights in Babylonian society. The codes may also have improved societal protections for women. They required men to repay dowries to women if they chose to leave the marriage and code 117 limits the amount of time that women might be in servitude as repayment for debt. Both could have been improvements over past practices.

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. Why might using Hammurabi's Code to learn about Babylonia be problematic? Do we know if people actually followed Hammurabi's Code? Do we know if it was enforced? Historians disagree about how Hammurabi's Code functioned in society.
- 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. 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 about life in Babylonia? Why might secondary sources from historians be particularly helpful?
- e. 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.*

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.

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.*