

The Code of Hammurabi



ABOUT THE READING In the 1700s BC, Hammurabi ruled the huge Babylonian Empire, which covered all of Mesopotamia. Hammurabi is famous for his code of laws—a collection of 282 rules that cover many topics. They were written down so that all members of the empire could read and obey them.



As you read think about why some of these laws were especially important to the many farmers living along the rivers of ancient Mesopotamia.

5. If a judge try a case, reach a decision, and present his judgment in writing; if later error shall appear in his decision, and it be through his own fault, then [the judge] shall pay twelve times the fine set by him in the case, and he shall be publicly removed from the judge's bench, and never again shall he sit there to [give] judgment.

6. If any one steal the property of a temple or of the court, he shall be put to death, and also the one who receives the stolen thing from him shall be put to death.

7. If any one buy from the son or the slave of another man, without witnesses or a contract, silver or gold, a male or female slave, an ox or a sheep, [a donkey] or anything . . . he is considered a thief and shall be put to death.

53. If any one be too lazy to keep his dam in proper condition, and does not so keep it; if then the dam break and all the fields be flooded, then shall he in whose dam the break [happened] . . . replace the corn which he has caused to be ruined.

Source: from *The Code of Hammurabi*, trans. by L. W. King, from <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/medieval/hamcode.htm>

VOCABULARY

try hear, examine

court royal palace

contract signed document

granary where grain is stored

neglect carelessness

This law explains what happens if a judge is found to have made a mistake in a case.

Certain transactions, such as buying money, slaves, or cattle, required a contract or witnesses. Without a contract or witnesses, the transaction was considered theft and the penalty was death.