Hammurabi's Code

California Standard 6.2.4: Know the significance of Hammurabi's Code

Purpose: To learn what Hammurabi's Code was and why it was written and why there is a need for fair and consistent laws in societies.

Objectives:
- Students will brainstorm positive and negative aspects of people living in large communities.
- Students will read the background of Hammurabi's Code.
- Students will discuss in small groups possible solutions to problems faced by Hammurabi and write down their ideas.
- Students will read the Hammurabi Code and discuss the laws.
- Students will choose one law and write a letter to the editor of the Babylonian Star discussing their opinion of the law, and why they feel that way.

Procedure:

- Day 1 Brainstorm problems that might develop when people begin to live in larger communities. Write all ideas on overhead. Students should copy.
- Day 2 Read background material on Hammurabi’s Code in Houghton-Mifflin (pgs. 172-173), and the handout.
- Day 3 On chart paper write six problems faced by Hammurabi and place one on each table. In small groups, students will read the problem, discuss it, come up with their solution to the problem, and write it on the chart paper. Then they will rotate to the next table. To avoid repetitions, make a rule outlawing copying any of the other solutions. Discuss all solutions and what Hammurabi would have done.
- Day 4 Students will read the laws of Hammurabi and discuss.
- Day 5 Students will write a letter to the editor of the Babylonian Star clearly stating the code, the student’s opinion, and a conclusion tying up the letter. If they disagree with the law, they need to give their ideas on how to solve the problem. The letter needs to follow attached rubric.

Evaluation: Students will write a letter to the editor discussing one of Hammurabi's codes. They will clearly state the code, their opinion, alternative suggestions to solve the problem, and a conclusion tying up the letter.

Note: Some classes may take longer to complete this lesson.
Prompt for Editorial

You are to write a letter to the editor of the *Babylonian Times*. In the letter you must clearly state the code number that you are discussing, your opinion of the code, and why you feel that way. If you disagree with the code, you need to offer suggestions to Hammurabi to consider. You need to follow the correct format for writing a business letter, be clear, concise, to the point, and include a conclusion that sums up your letter. You will need to sign your name, however this could be your death sentence in Hammurabi’s time!

Rubric for the Letter to the Editor

4 The written response is very specific to the task assigned. The information about the code is clearly stated along with the author’s personal convictions. Writing is expressive, clear, concise and to the point. The opinion is logical. A conclusion ties up the letter. The letter is written with very few grammar, punctuation, or spelling errors.

3 The written response is specific to the task assigned. The information is correct and an opinion is given. However, the writing neither manages to grasp the reader’s attention nor provide a convincing argument. A weak conclusion leaves the reader unsatisfied. There are some errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

2 The information provided is generally accurate but not insight is provided. There may or may not be an opinion about the code or a conclusion to the letter. If an opinion is provided, there may be problems with the logic. There are frequent errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

1 An assignment is turned in but it is unclear if it is for the task given or if the student ever heard of Hammurabi. The information is lacking, missing, inaccurate, or illogical. There are problems with the reasoning, and the reader is left unsatisfied with the editorial. The student needs a dictionary—paper or clay!
Hammurabi, the king of righteousness, on whom Shamash has conferred the law, am I.

When Marduk sent me to rule over men, to give the protection of right to the land, I did right and in righteousness brought about the well-being of the oppressed.

Below are situations Hammurabi faced. Decide what you think to be a fair way to deal with the problem. Then, click to see what Hammurabi declared. Would Marduk, the supreme god, be pleased with your decisions?

- What should be done to the carpenter who builds a house that falls and kills the owner?
- What should be done when a "sister of god" (or nun) enters the wine shop for a drink?
- What happens if a man is unable to pay his debts?
- What happens to the wine seller who fails to arrest bad characters gathered at her shop?
- What should be done about a wife who ignores her duties and belittles her husband?
- What should be done if a son is adopted and then the birth-parents want him back?
- What should happen to a boy who slaps his father?
- How is the truth determined when one man brings an accusation against another?

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Debate Hammurabi’s Code

The laws of Babylonian king Hammurabi (1728–1686 B.C.) are among the oldest recorded. These laws, known as Hammurabi’s Code, were engraved on a huge stone pillar that stood in a temple in Babylon. The pillar was excavated in the early 20th century. At its top is a carved picture of Hammurabi receiving the code of laws from the sun god, Shamash, who was also the god of justice. Hammurabi claimed the gods called on him “to make justice visible in the land.” He was to “destroy the wicked person and the evil-doer, so that the strong may not injure the weak.”

Below the picture and written introduction are 282 laws, organized into subjects such as family, property, religion, military, farming, trade, slavery, and business. They cover a wide range of offenses in each area. Hammurabi tried to choose laws that were fair, important to his people, and that did not conflict with each other. However, different standards of justice applied to different people.

At the bottom of the pillar, Hammurabi advised his successors to uphold the laws by stating that those who did would be blessed and that those who changed them would suffer. “May the mighty gods of heaven and earth curse him. May his land, his warriors, his people, and his nation be cursed.”

Some of the laws are described below.

- If a man is robbed and the robber is not caught, the local government will compensate the victim.
- If a man’s wife squanders his money and makes him poor, he may divorce her without paying any divorce money.
- The wife and children of a man are his property. To pay his debts, he may sell them into slavery for up to three years.
- If a man accuses another of murder and can’t prove it, the accuser may be put to death.
- A man who assaults another and puts out his eye shall have his own eye put out.
- A son who strikes his father shall have his hand cut off.
- A surgeon who operates on a freeman and causes him to die shall have his hand cut off.
- A farmer who carelessly floods his neighbor’s fields during irrigation shall pay for the ruined crops.
- If a commoner strikes a nobleman, he shall be whipped in public as an example to others.
- If a commoner strikes another commoner, he shall pay a fine equal to about 30 ounces of silver coins.
- If a commoner strikes a slave, a small fine shall be assessed.

The Debate

Find a copy of Hammurabi’s Code and read it. Divide into groups and debate the pros and cons of the laws. Compare the laws with the various codes of conduct of modern societies.

- Were they appropriate for the time period?
- How were they fair and unfair?
- Which people were favored by the laws and which were not?
- How are they similar to or different from the Ten Commandments and other codes of conduct?
- Have society’s problems changed or remained the same?
It's the Law: Hammurabi

In 1750 B.C.E. a king named Hammurabi rose to power in Babylon. He united much of Mesopotamia under one rule for the first time in centuries.

He was a powerful military leader, but that is not why we remember him. Hammurabi is known as a lawgiver. Actually, many Mesopotamian rulers created codes of law, but we do not have them because they were written on clay tablets which crumbled. Hammurabi had his laws engraved on a column of polished black rock over seven feet high. The stone, or stele, was set up in the middle of the city. The 282 decisions tell us much about justice at the time.

There were no police to arrest offenders. Victims had to drag wrong-doers into court. Both sides swore to tell the truth. A judge listened to testimony and made a decision.

The phrase “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” comes from one of Hammurabi’s punishments, but it was not his idea. It was an old Sumerian concept—exact revenge. Another way to put it would be, “What I take from you, you may take from me.” For example, if a builder used poor materials and the house he constructed killed someone when it collapsed, he could be executed. Some offenses were punished by fines. Jails were not mentioned.

Answer the following questions true or false:

1. Hammurabi was the first king to write and enforce laws in Mesopotamia.

2. Police arrested offenders and brought them to court.

3. Witnesses swore to tell the truth.

4. Some of Hammurabi’s laws originally came from ancient Egypt.

5. Hammurabi was a good military leader.

6. Hammurabi expanded Babylonia’s empire.

7. Hammurabi kept the stele with the laws on it in his palace.

DID YOU KNOW?

According to Hammurabi’s Code, a person could not be forced to work more than three years as a slave to pay off a debt.