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STUDENT PAGE



1750 B.C.: The Code of Hammurabi

In 1901, French archaeologists were working at a site in Iran when they found a large black stone. The stone was about eight feet high and two feet thick. It was covered in cuneiform, the wedge-shaped writing of ancient Babylonia. When the writing was deciphered, it turned out to be the oldest preserved code of laws.

The laws had been gathered by a king named Hammurabi, who ruled from 1792 to 1750 B.C. There were 282 laws in all. They covered all aspects of daily life, including legal procedures, family matters, marriage, ownership of land, leases, mortgages, wages,

business contracts, military service, and irrigation.

Below are some of the laws from Hammurabi's code. Each group member will be assigned two laws to analyze. Answer these questions about each law.

1. Do we have a similar law today?
2. What aspect of life does this law affect?
3. Whom is this law designed to benefit?
4. Why do you think this law was needed?
5. What kinds of things might happen if the law didn't exist?

Group A If a freeman brings false testimony in a case that carries the death sentence, he shall be put to death.

If a judge changes his decision after it has been sealed, he shall pay 12 times the amount of the claim in the case and shall be expelled from the position of judge.

Group B If a builder builds a house and does not make the construction firm, and the house collapses and causes the death of the owner, that builder shall be put to death.

If a physician operates on a freeman for a severe wound and causes the man's death, his fingers shall be cut off.

Group C If a freeman wants to disinherit his son but the judges find the son has done no grave wrong, the father may not disinherit his son.

If a woman wishes to divorce her husband and the records show that she has been careful and is not at fault, she may take her dowry and go to her father's house without any blame.

Group D If a freeman rents a field but does not cultivate it, he shall pay the owner grain based on the yield of adjoining fields.

If a freeman fails to build a strong enough dike and a break in the dike floods farmland, the owner of the dike shall make good the grain he let get destroyed.

Group E If one freeman gives another money for a partnership, they shall divide the profit or loss equally.

If a trader borrows money from a merchant and then denies it, and the merchant can prove the loan was made, the trader shall pay the merchant three times the amount he borrowed.

Now return to your original group. Share your answers about the laws you examined with your group. Look at all 10 laws given

here. As a group, make as many general statements as you can about this code of laws.