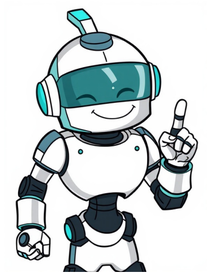
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ALSO READ: 9 Most Renowned Ancient Mesopotamian Cities The Code of Hammurabi Hammurabi (standing) receiving his royal insignia from the Mesopotamian sun god Shamash (or possibly Marduk). Image: Code of Hammurabi stele. Louvre Museum, Paris, France Without a doubt, Hammurabi's most lasting contribution to world history is the Code of Hammurabi. Inscribed on a seven-foot tall black diorite stele, the code consists of 282 laws that address various aspects of Babylonian society, including trade, property rights, family relations, and civil and criminal offenses. The prologue of the code extols Hammurabi's justice and his desire to "cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong may not oppress the weak." The epilogue invokes divine punishment on anyone who would dare alter the inscribed laws. While the code is often described as an "eye for an eye" system of justice, it is more complex. The laws varied based on the social status of both the offender and the victim. For instance, penalties for harming a nobleman were more severe than for harming a commoner. Beyond its specifics, the code's importance lies in its attempt to establish and codify a universal standard of justice. It is one of the earliest and most comprehensive legal codes in human history and served as a foundation for subsequent legal systems in the region. Hammurabi's Code about divorce and women's rights Did you know…? His name means "the kinsman is a healer." Hammurabi is commemorated as one of history's eminent lawgivers, with his likeness displayed in the U.S. Capitol Building and the U.S. Supreme Court, underscoring his enduring impact on legal thought and governance. Hammurabi's Religious Reforms Religion was integral to Mesopotamian life, and Hammurabi was no exception. He was a patron of various temples and considered himself the "devout god-fearing prince." To bolster his legitimacy, he linked his rule with the divine will. He often invoked the Mesopotamian god Marduk, the chief deity of Babylon, attributing his military victories and governance successes to Marduk's favor. Furthermore, Hammurabi actively supported religious infrastructure. He rebuilt and refurbished numerous temples across his empire and ensured that religious rituals and festivals were observed meticulously. ALSO READ: Marduk's Conflict with the Primordial Deity Tiamat A limestone votive monument from Sippar, Iraq, dating to c. 1792 – c. 1750 BC showing Babylonian King Hammurabi, now held in the British Museum ALSO READ: Most Famous Ancient Mesopotamian Deities and Their Powers Death and Legacy Hammurabi's death around 1750 BC marked the end of an era. While the Babylonian empire continued its dominance in the region for some time after his passing, it faced various challenges and eventually fell to the Hittites and later the Kassites. Yet, Hammurabi's legacy endured. His code influenced subsequent legal systems in Mesopotamia and beyond. The image of the king receiving the laws from the sun god Shamash, as depicted on the stele, became a lasting symbol of divinely sanctioned justice. In modern times, Hammurabi is revered as a pioneering lawgiver. The U.S. Supreme Court building features a depiction of Hammurabi alongside other great lawgivers in history. Conclusion King Hammurabi's reign was a transformative period in ancient Mesopotamian history. Through a combination of military conquests, astute governance, and groundbreaking legal codification, Hammurabi established Babylon as a dominant force in the region and laid the groundwork for the civilizations that followed. His Code, emphasizing justice and societal order, remains a testament to his profound impact on the development of human governance and law. ALSO READ: Creation Story in Ancient Babylonian Mythology Hammurabi was the sixth king of the First Babylonian Dynasty, reigning from approximately 1792 to 1750 BC. He is best known for the Code of Hammurabi, one of the earliest comprehensive legal codes. These questions from our ancient Mesopotamia historians offer a concise overview of King Hammurabi's life and reign, allowing readers to gain insights into one of ancient Mesopotamia's most influential figures. When was he born and what was his early life like? Hammurabi, born circa 1810 BC in Babylon, was the son of King Sin-Muballit. As Babylon's crown prince, his upbringing was centered on leadership preparation. He probably attended the 'tablet house', where he was educated about Babylonian deities and prominent Mesopotamian leaders. Beyond academic learning, he was trained in martial skills, essential for leading armies. His leadership acumen was further honed by observing his father's reign and heeding advice from royal counselors. When did he ascend to throne? Around the age of eighteen, Hammurabi became Babylon's king following his father's protracted battle with illness. Positioned amidst dominant kingdoms such as Assyria and Mari, the young monarch confronted the immense responsibility of protecting and nurturing his relatively smaller kingdom. Despite the weight of this challenge, Hammurabi's steadfast belief in his capabilities, combined with a clear strategic plan, set him on a path to fortify and elevate Babylon's stature in the region. What was his early reign like? In the initial years of his rule, Hammurabi focused on enhancing Babylon's infrastructure. Prioritizing peace, he forged treaties with prominent Mesopotamian nations. With the city's security ensured, he undertook extensive development projects. Also, he fortified Babylon's walls, revamped its irrigation system, and erected grand temples dedicated to the gods. These strategic improvements led to a flourishing Babylon, elevating its status and power in the region. Tablet of Hammurabi 4th line from the top), King of Babylon. British Museum. How did he defend his people against the Elamites? After dedicating years to construction and development, Hammurabi's era of peace was disrupted when Elam, a formidable kingdom, invaded Mesopotamia, capturing Eshnunna and setting its sights on Babylon. In response, Hammurabi sought assistance from his ally, Larsa, and rallied his troops to confront the territory-hungry Elamites. Although he anticipated reinforcements from Larsa, they disappointingly never arrived. Regardless, Hammurabi had prudently fortified Babylon and trained his forces for such challenges. Relying on this preparation and strategic planning, Hammurabi's army resoundingly defeated the Elamite invaders, demonstrating his leadership prowess and the resilience of Babylon under his reign. How did Hammurabi expand his empire? Hammurabi expanded his empire through a combination of military conquests, strategic alliances, and diplomacy. One of Hammurabi's primary methods for expanding the Babylonian Empire was through military force. He waged campaigns against various neighboring city-states and kingdoms, gradually incorporating their territories into his empire. In the early years of his reign, Hammurabi often formed alliances with neighboring kingdoms, such as his alliance with Larsa to counter the threat of other powerful city-states. These alliances sometimes provided short-term security, although they were often tested and shifted as regional dynamics changed. The Babylonian ruler understood the importance of diplomatic relations and used treaties to establish peace and ensure stability. This allowed him to focus on internal development without the constant threat of external aggression. By bolstering Babylon's defenses, Hammurabi made it a formidable city, deterring potential aggressors and ensuring a secure base for further expansion. The fortified city acted as a bulwark against invasion and as a springboard for offensive campaigns. After conquering territories, Hammurabi worked to integrate them into his empire. This was achieved through administrative reforms, the imposition of his legal code to establish order and justice, and infrastructure development to ensure economic growth. What were some of the key conquests during Hammurabi's reign? Eshnunna: Located to the northeast of Babylon, Eshnunna was a key target for Hammurabi's expansionist ambitions. Once conquered, it provided Babylon with greater access to trade routes. Larsa: Initially an ally, Larsa later became a rival. Hammurabi eventually defeated Larsa, which controlled the key city of Ur and other parts of southern Mesopotamia, thereby consolidating his rule over the region. Mari: Located on the Euphrates River, Mari was a strategic conquest that provided Babylon with greater control over the middle Euphrates region. Elam: Though more of a defensive action, Hammurabi's confrontation with the Elamites was essential in securing his eastern borders. Through a combination of diplomacy and military tactics, Hammurabi transformed Babylon from a relatively small city-state into the dominant kingdom in Mesopotamia, laying the foundation for the future Babylonian Empire What is the Code of Hammurabi? The Code of Hammurabi is a set of 282 laws inscribed on a diorite stele. These laws cover various aspects of society, including trade, property rights, and family relations. Hammurabi Code about Adultery Click this link to learn more about Hammurabi's Code of Laws. Why is the Code of Hammurabi significant? The code represents one of the earliest attempts to establish a universal standard of justice. It influenced subsequent legal systems in the region and beyond. How did Hammurabi expand the Babylonian empire? Hammurabi strategically engaged in military and diplomatic campaigns, bringing city-states like Uruk, Isin, and Larsa under Babylonian control. By the end of his reign, he unified most of Mesopotamia. Was Hammurabi only known for his code? While the code is his most famous accomplishment, Hammurabi was also an astute military leader, administrator, and religious patron. He was responsible for significant infrastructure projects and administrative reforms. How did Hammurabi's rule impact religion in Mesopotamia? Hammurabi actively supported religious institutions, rebuilt temples, and closely associated his rule with the divine will, especially with the god Marduk. How did Hammurabi die? The exact circumstances of Hammurabi's death are not well-documented in extant historical sources. What we do know is that Hammurabi reigned from approximately 1792 BC to 1750 BC, making his reign about 43 years long. Hammurabi passed away in 1750 BC, concluding a 43-year reign marked by peace and prosperity in Mesopotamia during his latter years. Unfortunately, details about the cause of Hammurabi's death or any events directly associated with it have not been preserved in the records available to us. Like many ancient historical figures, certain aspects of his life and death remain shrouded in mystery. Image: Marble frieze of Hammurabi by German-born American sculptor Adolph Weinman in the United States Who succeeded Hammurabi to the throne? After his death, he was succeeded by his son, Samsu-iluna. Did Hammurabi's empire last long after his death? While the Babylonian empire continued its dominance for a while post-Hammurabi, it eventually faced challenges from groups like the Hittites and Kassites. How is Hammurabi remembered in modern times? Hammurabi is revered as a pioneering lawgiver. For instance, the U.S. Supreme Court building features an image of Hammurabi among other great historical lawgivers. What was Hammurabi's relationship with other city-states? Initially, Hammurabi formed alliances with neighboring city-states. However, as his reign progressed, he used military force to bring many of these city-states under Babylonian control. Where can one see the original Code of Hammurabi? The stele bearing the Code of Hammurabi is currently housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris. A visually engaging infographic explaining Hammurabi's Code—its historical context, legal structure, and influence—now complete with the MAXMAG logo at the bottom center. When people speak about the origins of justice, one name that continues to echo through the ages is Hammurabi. As the sixth king of Babylon, Hammurabi ruled from around 1792 to 1750 BCE and is best known for creating one of the earliest and most influential written legal systems in human history. The Hammurabi's Code meaning goes beyond its literal function as law—it offers a window into the values, governance, and social structure of ancient Mesopotamia. Etched onto a towering basalt stele, this ancient collection of 282 laws dealt with everything from trade and labor to family life and criminal justice. Today, it's considered a cornerstone of early civilization's efforts to organize society through law and order. But why does it matter so much in our modern understanding of justice and ethics? Let's explore the origins, structure, and enduring impact of Hammurabi's Code—and unpack what it really meant to the people of Mesopotamia and what it continues to symbolize in today's world. What Is Hammurabi's Code? To grasp Hammurabi's Code meaning, one must understand its function. Carved around 1754 BCE, the code was a set of rules enforced to bring order and fairness to Babylonian society. It was a top-down system of governance that addressed property rights, wages, theft, debt, marriage, slavery, and even medical malpractice. The laws are famously known for their strict nature, often summed up by the phrase "an eye for an eye." But Hammurabi's approach wasn't solely retributive. Many laws focused on compensation, fair treatment, and the protection of the vulnerable—particularly widows, orphans, and the poor. Each law began with a condition ("If a man…") followed by a consequence, making the Code remarkably structured and readable even by modern standards. The Stele of Hammurabi The physical stele on which the Code was written stands over seven feet tall and was originally displayed in a public space in Babylon, ensuring that the laws were visible to all literate citizens. At its top, a relief carving shows Hammurabi receiving the laws from Shamash, the Mesopotamian god of justice, symbolizing divine authority behind the legislation. Today, the stele resides at the Louvre Museum in Paris and remains one of the most studied artifacts of antiquity (source). Legal Structure and Social Hierarchy Understanding Hammurabi's Code meaning also requires examining the rigid class distinctions it upheld. The laws did not treat all people equally; they explicitly differentiated between three main classes: the free man (awilum), the dependent (mushkenum), and the slave (wardum). For example, if a nobleman struck another nobleman, the punishment was proportionate. But if a nobleman struck someone of lower status, the penalties were far lighter—or sometimes absent altogether. This systemic inequality was baked into the Code, reflecting the deeply hierarchical nature of Babylonian society. While modern legal systems strive for universal equality under the law, Hammurabi's Code reveals how ancient justice was often conditional on class and status. Justice and Retribution One of the most recognizable features of Hammurabi's Code is its principle of lex talionis, or the law of retaliation. The concept of "an eye for an eye" appears in several provisions, such as: "If a man destroy the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye." "If he breaks another man's bone, they shall break his bone." However, modern scholars point out that this rule of retribution applied primarily to the upper classes. Commoners and slaves received lesser forms of justice—often financial compensation instead of bodily punishment. This dual standard emphasizes how Hammurabi's Code meaning was both progressive and flawed. It introduced clear legal processes but failed to achieve full equity. Innovations in Legal Thinking Despite its limitations, Hammurabi's Code introduced several concepts that still resonate in today's jurisprudence: Presumption of innocence: Some laws required accusers to present evidence. Public records: Laws were written and displayed for transparency. Accountability: Professions like surgeons and builders were subject to strict standards. For example, a builder whose house collapsed and killed the owner would be sentenced to death. While harsh by today's standards, the principle of accountability is foundational in modern professions. As Smithsonian Magazine notes, the Code established a crucial shift from arbitrary decisions to rule-based justice—a defining milestone in the history of civilization. A Glimpse into Daily Life The laws of Hammurabi weren't only about crime and punishment. They also regulated daily life in detail: Divorce settlements Agricultural leases Interest on loans Artisan contracts Food and drink quality This level of governance reveals how centralized and organized Babylonian society had become. Farmers, merchants, laborers, and even tavern keepers had to operate under defined legal norms. These norms fostered stability in one of the world's earliest urban civilizations. Such complexity is what gives the Hammurabi's Code meaning not just as a relic but as an ancient guide to managing human behavior. Comparison with Other Ancient Legal Systems Although Hammurabi's Code was among the earliest, it wasn't the first. The Sumerian Code of Ur-Nammu predates it by a few centuries. Later, similar codes would appear in Hebrew law (Torah), Roman law, and beyond. What made Hammurabi's contribution unique was its comprehensiveness and durability. It inspired legal reforms throughout Mesopotamia and influenced neighboring civilizations for centuries. Hammurabi's Code in Modern Culture Even today, Hammurabi's laws echo in our collective consciousness. His principles are taught in history classes, referenced in discussions of ethics, and sometimes even cited in legal theory. Modern courts no longer enforce retributive justice in the same way, but the core idea—that laws should be known, written, and applied consistently—remains central. That is the deepest Hammurabi's Code meaning: the birth of the idea that society must be governed not by men, but by laws. Archaeological Discovery The stele was discovered in 1901 by a French archaeological expedition in Susa (modern-day Iran), far from Babylon. It had been looted centuries earlier by the Elamites. Its recovery was monumental. Not only did it confirm many theories about Mesopotamian governance, but it also served as a Rosetta Stone of sorts, helping scholars decode cuneiform and gain broader access to ancient literature and records. For further exploration of ancient Near Eastern laws, visit this educational feature from the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute. Inbound Link Learn more about the legacy of Mesopotamia's early civilizations in this Maxmag feature on Queen Puabi's tomb. Frequently Asked Questions What is Hammurabi's Code meaning in modern terms?It refers to one of the earliest systems of written laws that governed daily life in Babylon and established the principle of codified justice. Why is Hammurabi's Code important?It marked the shift from arbitrary justice to a formal legal system, influencing future legal codes worldwide. Where is Hammurabi's stele located today?The original stele is housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris, France. Did Hammurabi write the laws himself?The laws are attributed to him, but they were likely compiled by royal scribes under his supervision. Was Hammurabi's Code fair?While it provided structure, the laws were class-based and not equally applied to all people, especially slaves and women. Hammurabi was an ancient Babylonian king who ruled from approximately 1792 BCE to 1750 BCE. He is renowned for his Code of Hammurabi, one of the earliest known legal codes in human history. This code, inscribed on a stone pillar, outlined laws that governed various aspects of Babylonian society and introduced the principle of "an eye for an eye." Hammurabi's reign also saw significant agricultural reforms, military conquests, and the promotion of the worship of Marduk, the chief god of Babylon. His legacy endures through his contributions to law and governance, which continue to be studied and admired by historians and legal scholars today. Hammurabi was an ancient Mesopotamian king who ruled over the Babylonian Empire from approximately 1792 BCE to 1750 BCE. This period was during the Bronze Age, and his reign had a significant impact on the region's history. Hammurabi's most enduring legacy is the Code of Hammurabi, which is one of the earliest known legal codes in human history. This code was a comprehensive set of laws and regulations that governed various aspects of Babylonian society during his rule. Also Read: Hammurabi Accomplishments The Code of Hammurabi was inscribed on a large stone pillar, known as a stele, made of black diorite. The stele stood about seven feet tall and contained 282 laws written in Akkadian cuneiform script. These laws were prominently displayed in the city of Babylon, where they could be seen by the general population, emphasizing the king's commitment to justice and order in society. The Code of Hammurabi consisted of 282 laws. These laws were meticulously inscribed on a large stone pillar, known as a stele, made of black diorite. The stele was created during Hammurabi's reign and was prominently displayed in the city of Babylon, which served as the capital of his empire. These laws covered various aspects of Babylonian society and were publicly displayed, emphasizing Hammurabi's commitment to justice and transparency. One of the most well-known principles of the Code of Hammurabi is the concept of "an eye for an eye." This principle, also known as lex talionis, meant that punishments for crimes should be proportionate and reflective of the harm done. Also Read: Timeline of Hammurabi For example, if someone caused physical harm to another person, they would receive a punishment of similar severity. While "an eye for an eye" is often associated with Hammurabi's code, it's important to note that the code also included other legal provisions, covering areas such as property disputes, contracts, marriage, and inheritance. The Code of Hammurabi was a comprehensive legal document that covered a wide range of issues faced by the society of ancient Babylon. Some key legal principles and aspects of the code include: Distinctions based on social class: The code recognized different social classes, and the severity of punishments often depended on the social status of the individuals involved. For instance, crimes against nobles often carried harsher penalties than those against commoners. Protection of property rights: The code included provisions for the protection of property rights, including regulations regarding the sale of land and the enforcement of contracts. Family and marital matters: It addressed issues related to family law, such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, outlining rules for matters like dowries and adultery. Commercial regulations: The code also contained provisions regarding trade and commerce, including setting standard prices for goods and services to prevent price gouging. Personal injury and liability: It established rules for compensation in cases of personal injury, outlining the compensation owed to victims and their families. Hammurabi implemented agricultural reforms to improve the state of agriculture in Babylon. These reforms were aimed at ensuring the proper cultivation of land and the equitable distribution of resources: Regulation of irrigation: Hammurabi took measures to regulate the use of irrigation canals to ensure that water resources were distributed fairly among farmers. This helped prevent disputes over water rights and ensured more stable agricultural production. Standardized measurements and prices: The code standardized measurements for agricultural produce and established fair prices for goods. This provided some stability and predictability in agricultural trade. During his reign, Hammurabi conducted military campaigns aimed at expanding and consolidating the Babylonian Empire: Conquests: He led successful military campaigns against neighboring city-states and regions, including Elam, Mari, and Larsa. These conquests expanded Babylon's territory and influence. Consolidation: Hammurabi also worked to consolidate his empire by establishing garrisons and administrative centers in newly conquered territories. This helped maintain control over the conquered regions. Hammurabi was involved in several public works projects during his reign to enhance the infrastructure and prosperity of the Babylonian Empire: Temple construction: He sponsored the construction and renovation of temples dedicated to various gods in Babylon and other cities within his empire. Temples were not only religious centers but also important economic and administrative hubs. Defensive walls: Hammurabi also invested in the construction and maintenance of defensive walls around cities, which helped protect the empire's borders and maintain security within its territories. Canals and irrigation: In addition to regulating irrigation, Hammurabi oversaw the construction and maintenance of canals to facilitate agricultural activities. Proper irrigation and water management were crucial for the empire's agricultural success. As king, Hammurabi had a religious role in Babylonian society. The Babylonians practiced polytheism, and their religion played a significant role in daily life. Hammurabi promoted the worship of Marduk, the chief god of the Babylonian pantheon. He elevated Marduk's status to a supreme deity and made his temple, the Esagila, one of the most prominent religious centers in Babylon. He participated in various religious ceremonies and rituals, which were essential for maintaining the favor of the gods and ensuring the prosperity of the empire. Hammurabi's legacy is enduring and has left a significant mark on human history: Legal influence: The Code of Hammurabi served as a foundational legal document and influenced the development of subsequent legal systems in the ancient world. Concepts such as "an eye for an eye" and the idea of written legal codes had a lasting impact on the evolution of legal thought. Historical importance: Hammurabi's reign and accomplishments are important for understanding the history of Mesopotamia and the development of early civilization. Historical records: The inscriptions on the Code of Hammurabi's stele also provide valuable historical information about the social, economic, and political conditions of ancient Babylon during his reign. Hammurabi (born, Babylon [now in Iraq]—died c. 1750 bce) was the sixth and best-known ruler of the 1st (Amorite) dynasty of Babylon (reigning c. 1792–1750 bce), noted for his surviving set of laws, once considered the oldest promulgation of laws in human history. See Hammurabi, Code of.Like all the kings of his dynasty except his father and grandfather, Hammurabi bore a tribal Amorite name belonging to the Amnanum. Only scanty information exists about his immediate family: his father, Sin-muballit; his sister, Iltani; and his firstborn son and successor, Samsuiluna, are known by name.When Hammurabi succeeded Sin-muballit about 1792 bce, he was still young, but, as was customary in Mesopotamian royal courts of the time, he had probably already been entrusted with some official duties in the administration of the realm. In that same year Rim-Sin of Larsa, who ruled over the entire south of Babylonia, conquered Isin, which served as a buffer between Babylon and Larsa. Rim-Sin later became Hammurabi's chief rival. Kings and Emperors (Part III) Quiz The reconstruction of Hammurabi's rule is based mainly on his date formulas (years were named for a significant act the king had performed in the previous year or at the beginning of the year thus named). These show him engaged in the traditional activities of an ancient Mesopotamian king: building and restoring temples, city walls, and public buildings, digging canals, dedicating cult objects to the deities in the cities and towns of his realm, and fighting wars. His official inscriptions commemorating his building activities corroborate this but add no significant historical information.The size, location, and military strength of the realm left to Hammurabi made it one of the major powers in Babylonia. That Hammurabi was not strong enough to change the balance of power by his own will is well expressed in a diplomatic report: "There is no king who is powerful for himself: with Hammurabi, 'the man of Babylon,' go 10 or 15 kings, so with Rim-Sin, 'the man of Larsa'; with Ibalpiel, 'the man of Eshunna,'…go 20 kings."Hammurabi inherited one major direction for his political activity: to succeed in controlling the Euphrates waters—important in an area that depended exclusively on irrigation agriculture. Such a policy naturally led to conflicts with the kingdom of Larsa, which was situated in a disadvantageous downstream position. This policy, begun by Hammurabi's great-grandfather but most forcefully and partially successfully pursued by his father, Hammurabi himself took up in 1787 bce, near the beginning of his reign, when he conquered the cities Uruk (Erech) and Isin, held by Rim-Sin, and clashed again with Rim-Sin the year after. But, according to Hammurabi's date formulas and contemporary diplomatic correspondence, these operations led no further because Hammurabi shifted the direction of his military operations in 1784 toward the northwest and the east. For almost 20 years thereafter no significant warlike activity is reported. These years were characterized by changing coalitions among the main kingdoms—Mari, Ashur, Eshnunna, Babylon, and Larsa. Hammurabi used this time of uneasy stalemate to fortify several cities on his northern borders (1776–1768 bce).The last 14 years of Hammurabi's reign were overshadowed by continuous warfare. In 1764 Hammurabi dealt with a coalition of Ashur, Eshnunna, and Elam—the main powers east of the Tigris—whose position threatened to block his access to the metal-producing areas of Iran. It can be assumed, however, that Hammurabi took the initiative in moving against Rim-Sin of Larsa in 1763 bce. Few particulars are reported about this latter war, but it seems that Hammurabi successfully employed a stratagem that apparently had been used before by Sin-muballit against Rim-Sin: damming up the water of a main watercourse and then either releasing it suddenly to create a devastating flood or simply withholding it—the main resource of life—from the enemy's people (that Hammurabi used this device to bring about Rim-Sin's defeat can be assumed from the fact that in 1760 he rebuilt a canal—the western branch of the Euphrates—to facilitate the resettlement of the uprooted population that lived along its course before this war). The final siege of Larsa, Rim-Sin's last stronghold, lasted for several months. It was the last step to Hammurabi's victory. In 1762 bce Hammurabi again engaged in hostilities with the eastern powers. It is unknown whether this was a protective move on his part or a reaction on theirs to the change in the balance of power. The motives that led Hammurabi in 1761 bce against his longtime ally, Zimrilim, king of Mari, 250 miles (400 km) upstream from Babylon on the Euphrates, remain enigmatic. Two explanations are likely: it was either again a fight over water rights or an attempt by Hammurabi to gain control over Mari's excellent location at the crossroads of the ancient Middle East's overland trade.Two years later Hammurabi had to direct his armies eastward for a third time (1757–1755 bce). The final destruction of Eshnunna during this campaign—again achieved by damming up the waters—most likely proved to be a pyrrhic victory, because it removed a buffer zone between Babylonia proper and the peoples of the east (among them probably the Kassites, who were to take over in Babylonia 160 years hence). During his last two years, Hammurabi thus had to concentrate on the construction of defense fortifications. By this time he was a sick man, and he died about 1750 bce, with the burden of government already being carried by his son, Samsuiluna.Changes affecting nearly all spheres of life took place during Hammurabi's reign. They were aimed at the consolidation of conditions resulting from the transformation of a small city-state into a large territorial state. His letters show that he personally engaged in the details of implementing these changes and in the daily routine of the administration of his realm. This personal style is characteristic for Hammurabi and also for other contemporary rulers. Hammurabi's laws—not a law code in the modern sense—must also be considered as an expression of his concern to be a just ruler—an ideal pursued by Mesopotamian kings at all times.That Hammurabi failed to set up an effective bureaucratic system may be attributed to his personal style in the governance of his realm and the fact that he was fully engaged in wars during the last part of his reign. The lack of effective administration might have been one reason for the fast deterioration after his death of what he had achieved in military terms.When Hammurabi conquered southern Babylonia he did not follow the century-old tradition of having himself deified during his lifetime. There is reason to believe that this was his personal decision, probably based on a different view of the nature of kingship, setting a precedent for the concept of kingship until Hellenistic times.Hammurabi's eminence in Mesopotamian history has long been exaggerated. It was first based on the discovery of his laws but subsequent discoveries of older, though less voluminous, collections of laws have led to a less enthusiastic view. Moreover, the frequently noted resemblance between Hammurabi's laws and the Mosaic laws is now seen in terms of common heritage rather than as proof for direct dependency.Hammurabi is also credited with bringing Mesopotamia again under a single rule. Although there existed certain trends toward such unification—particularly expressed in the themes depicted on contemporary seals and in the apodoses of omens evoking a past when such kings as Sargon of Akkad and Shulgi ruled Mesopotamia from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea—it is doubtful that unification was the only motive for Hammurabi's conquests. The lasting achievement of Hammurabi's rule was that the theatre of Mesopotamian history, which had been in the south from the beginning of the 3rd millennium bce, was shifted to the north, where it remained for more than 1,000 years. Hammurabi and Shamash Mbzt (CC BY-SA) Hammurabi (r. 1792-1750 BCE) was the sixth king of the Amorite First Dynasty of Babylon best known for his famous law code which served as the model for others, including the Mosaic Law of the Bible. He was the first ruler able to successfully govern all of Mesopotamia, without revolt, following his initial conquest. He is also known as Ammurapi and Khammurabi and assumed the throne from his father, Sin-Muballit, who had stabilized the kingdom but could not expand upon it. The kingdom of Babylon comprised only the cities of Babylon, Kish, Sippar, and Borsippa when Hammurabi came to the throne but, through a succession of military campaigns, careful alliances made and broken when necessary, and political maneuvers, he held the entire region under Babylonian control by 1750 BCE. According to his own inscriptions, letters and administrative documents from his reign, he sought to improve the lives of those who lived under his rule. As noted, he is best known in the modern day for his law code which is often cited as being the first in history although it is not. There were earlier codes in Mesopotamia but Hammurabi's were the clearest and most inclusive and so came to serve as a model for other cultures, including the laws set down by Hebrew scribes in the Bible. Conquered cities were absorbed into Hammurabi's kingdom & then repaired & improved upon. Background & Rise to Power The Amorites were a nomadic people who migrated across Mesopotamia from the coastal region of Eber Nari (modern day Syria) at some point prior to the 3rd millennium BCE and by 1984 BCE were ruling in Babylon. The fifth king of the dynasty, Sin-Muballit (r. 1812-1793 BCE), successfully completed many public works projects but was unable to expand the kingdom or compete with the rival city of Larsa to the south. Larsa was the most lucrative trade center on the Persian Gulf and the profits from this trade enriched the city and encouraged expansion so that most of the cities of the south were under Larsa's control. Sin-Muballit led a force against Larsa but was defeated by their king Rim Sin I. At this point it is uncertain what exactly happened, but it seems that Sin-Muballit was compelled to abdicate in favor of his son Hammurabi. Whether Rim Sin I thought Hammurabi would be less of a threat to Larsa is also unknown but, if so, he would be proven wrong. The historian Durant writes: At the outset of [Babylonian history] stands the powerful figure of Hammurabi, conqueror and lawgiver through a reign of forty-three years. Primeval seals and inscriptions transmit him to us partially – a youth full of fire and genius, a very whirlwind in battle, who crushes all rebels, cuts his enemies into pieces, marches over inaccessible mountains, and never loses an engagement. Under him the petty warring states of the lower valley were forced into unity and peace, and disciplined into order and security by an historic code of laws. (219) Initially, Hammurabi gave Rim Sin I no cause for alarm. He began his reign by centralizing and streamlining his administration, continuing his father's building programs and enlarging and heightening the walls of the city. He instituted his famous code of laws (c. 1772 BCE), paid careful attention to the needs of the people, improved irrigation of fields and maintenance of the infrastructures of the cities under his control, while also building opulent temples to the gods. At the same time he was setting his troops in order and planning his campaign for the southern region of Mesopotamia. Ancient Syro-Mesopotamia ca. 1764 BCE Attar-Aram syria, using a modified map originally made by SÃ©mhur. (CC BY-SA) Conqueror of Mesopotamia The scholar Stephen Bertman notes how Hammurabi's personal character worked to his advantage early in his reign: Hammurabi was an able administrator, an adroit diplomat, and canny imperialist, patient in the achievement of his goals. Upon taking the throne, he issued a proclamation forgiving people's debts and during the first five years of his reign further enhanced his popularity by piously renovating the sanctuaries of the gods, especially Marduk, Babylon's patron. Then, with his power at home secure and his military forces primed, he began a five-year series of campaigns against rival states to the south and east, expanding his territory. (87) When the Elamites invaded the central plains of Mesopotamia from the east, Hammurabi allied himself with Larsa to defeat them. That accomplished, he broke the alliance and swiftly took the cities of Uruk and Isin, previously held by Larsa, by forming alliances with other city-states such as Nippur and Lagash. The alliances he made with other states would repeatedly be broken when the king found it necessary to do so but, as rulers continued to enter into pacts with Hammurabi, it does not seem to have occurred to any of them that he would do the same to them as he had previously to others. Once Uruk and Isin were conquered, he turned and took Nippur and Lagash and then conquered Larsa. A technique he seems to have used first in this engagement would become his preferred method in others when circumstances allowed: the damming up of water sources to the city to withhold them from the enemy until surrender or, possibly, withholding the waters through a dam and then releasing them to flood the city before then mounting an attack. This was a method previously used by Hammurabi's father but with considerably less efficacy. Larsa was the last stronghold of Rim Sin and, with its fall, there was no other force to stand against the king of Babylon in the south. Hammurabi struck swiftly at Mari in 1761 BCE &, for some reason, destroyed it instead of simply conquering it. With the southern part of Mesopotamia under control, Hammurabi turned north and west. The Amorite Kingdom of Mari in Syria had long been an ally of Amorite Babylon, and Hammurabi continued friendly relations with the king Zimri-Lim (r. 1775-1761 BCE). Zimri-Lim had led successful military campaigns through the north of Mesopotamia and, owing to the wealth generated from these victories, Mari had grown to be the envy of other cities with one of the largest and most opulent palaces in the region. Scholars have long debated why Hammurabi would break his alliance with Zimri-Lim but the reason seems fairly clear: Mari was an important, luxurious, and prosperous trade center on the Euphrates River and possessed great riches and, of course, water rights. Holding the city directly, instead of having to negotiate for resources, would be preferable to any ruler and certainly was so to Hammurabi. He struck swiftly at Mari in 1761 BCE and, for some reason, destroyed it instead of simply conquering it. This is a much greater mystery than why he would march against it in the first place. Other conquered cities were absorbed into the kingdom and then repaired and improved upon. Why Mari was such an exception to Hammurabi's rule is still debated by scholars, but the reason could be as simple as that Hammurabi wanted Babylon to be the greatest of the Mesopotamian cities and Mari was a definite rival for this honor. Zimri-Lim is thought to have been killed in this engagement as he vanishes from the historical record in that same year. From Mari, Hammurabi marched on Ashur and took the region of Assyria and finally Eshnunna (also conquered by damming up of the waters) so that, by 1755 BCE, he ruled all of Mesopotamia. Law Code Tablet of King Hammurabi from Nippur Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin (Copyright) Hammurabi's Code & the Care of the People Although Hammurabi spent a considerable amount of time on campaign, he made sure to provide for the people whose lands he ruled over. A popular title applied to Hammurabi in his lifetime was bani matim, 'builder of the land', because of the many building projects and canals he ordered constructed throughout the region. Documents from the time attest to the efficacy of Hammurabi's rule and his sincere desire to improve the lives of the people of Mesopotamia. These letters and administrative works (such as directives for the building of canals, food distribution, beautification and building projects, and legal issues) support the view which Hammurabi held of himself. The prologue to his famous law code begins: When the lofty Anu, King of the Annunaki and Bel, Lord of Heaven and Earth, he who determines the destiny of the land, committed the rule of all mankind to Marduk, when they pronounced the lofty name of Babylon, when they made it famous among the quarters of the world and in its midst established an everlasting kingdom whose foundations were firm as heaven and earth – at that time Anu and Bel called me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, the worshipper of the gods, to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, to enlighten the land and to further the welfare of the people. Hammurabi, the governor named by Bel, am I, who brought about plenty and abundance. (Durant, 219) Hammurabi's Law Code James Blake Wiener (CC BY-NC-SA) His law code is not the first such code in history (though it is often called so) but is certainly the most famous from antiquity prior to the code set down in the biblical books. The Code of Ur-Nammu (c. 2100-2050 BCE), which originated with either Ur-Nammu (r. 2047-2030 BCE) or his son Shulgi of Ur (r. 2029-1982 BCE), is the oldest code of laws in the world. Hammurabi's code differed from the earlier laws in significant ways. The historian Kriwaczek explains this, writing: Hammurabi's laws reflect the shock of an unprecedented social environment: the multi-ethnic, multi-tribal Babylonian world. In earlier Sumerian-Akkadian times, all communities had felt themselves to be joint members of the same family, all equally servants under the eyes of the gods. In such circumstances disputes could be settled by recourse to a collectively accepted value system, where blood was thicker than water, and fair restitution more desirable than revenge. Now, however, when urban citizens commonly rubbed shoulders with nomads following a completely different way of life, when speakers of several west Semitic Amurru languages, as well as others, were thrown together with uncomprehending Akkadians, confrontation must all too easily have spilled over into conflict. Vendettas and blood feuds must often have threatened the cohesion of the empire. (180) The Code of Ur-Nammu certainly relies on the concept of "joint members of the same family" in that an underlying understanding by the people of proper behavior in society is assumed throughout. Everyone under the law was expected to already know what the gods required of them, and the king was expected simply to administer the god's will. Historian Karen Rhea Nemet-Najat writes: The king was directly responsible for administering justice on behalf of the gods, who had established law and order in the universe. (221) Hammurabi's code was written in a later time when one tribe's or city's understanding of the will of the gods might be different from another's. In order to simplify matters, Hammurabi's code sought to prevent vendetta and blood feuds by stating clearly the crime - and the punishment which would be administered Cuneiform Tablet Listing the Names of Old Babylonian Kings Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin (Copyright) by the state for committing such crime – without assuming a communal understanding of the god's will in these matters: Sign up for our free weekly email newsletter! If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out. If he break another man's bone, his bone shall be broken. If a man knock out the teeth of his equal, his teeth shall be knocked out. If a builder build a house for someone, and does not construct it properly, And the house which he built fall in and kill its owner, then that builder shall be put to death. If it kill the son of the owner of the house, the son of that builder shall be put to death. Unlike the earlier Code of Ur-Nammu, which imposed fines or penalties of land, Hammurabi's code epitomized the principle known as Lex Talionis, the law of retributive justice, in which punishment corresponds directly to the crime, better known as the concept of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', made famous from the later law code of the Old Testament, exemplified in this passage from the Book of Exodus: If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise. (Exodus 21:22-25) Hammurabi's law code set the standard for future codes in dealing strictly with the evidence of the crime & setting a specific punishment. Hammurabi's law code thus set the standard for future codes in dealing strictly with the evidence of the crime and setting a specific punishment for that crime. What decided one's guilt or innocence, however, was the much older method of the Ordeal, in which an accused person was sentenced to perform a certain task (usually being thrown into a river or having to swim a certain distance across a river) and, if they succeeded, they were innocent and, if not, they were guilty. Hammurabi's code stipulates that: If a man's wife has been pointed out because of another man, even though she has not been caught with him, for her husband's sake she must plunge into the divine river. The woman who did so and survived the ordeal would be recognized as innocent, but then her accuser would be found guilty of false witness and punished by death. The 