

# **The Code Of Hammurabi Ap Art History**



**The Code of Hammurabi** is one of the most significant artifacts from ancient Mesopotamia and holds a pivotal place in the history of law and governance. Dating back to around 1754 BCE, this Babylonian legal text is inscribed on a stele and provides a glimpse into the socio-political structure of ancient societies. The Code of Hammurabi is not just a legal document; it embodies the values, norms, and moral codes of the time, reflecting how justice was perceived and administered in the ancient world. This article delves into the historical context, structure, themes, and significance of the Code of Hammurabi within the framework of AP Art History.

## Historical Context

The Code of Hammurabi was created during the reign of King Hammurabi, who ruled Babylon from approximately 1792 BCE to 1750 BCE. This period is crucial in the development of complex societies in Mesopotamia. The Babylonian Empire was characterized by:

1. **Centralized Power:** Hammurabi centralized the administrative functions of his empire, which allowed for the codification of laws.
2. **Agricultural Economy:** The reliance on agriculture necessitated regulations regarding land use, trade, and labor.
3. **Social Stratification:** Babylonian society was hierarchical, with distinct classes, including nobles, free men, and slaves. The Code addresses the rights and responsibilities of these different groups.

The stele that houses the code was discovered in 1901 in what is now Iran. It stands nearly 7.4 feet tall and is made of diorite, a hard stone that symbolizes the permanence and authority of the laws inscribed upon it.

## Physical Description and Structure of the Stele

The Code of Hammurabi stele is not only a legal document but also a remarkable piece of art. Its artistic features include:

### Visual Composition

- **Iconography:** At the top of the stele, Hammurabi is depicted receiving the law from Shamash, the sun god and god of justice. This imagery emphasizes the divine origin of the laws, reinforcing Hammurabi's authority as a ruler chosen by the gods.
- **Bas-Relief Carving:** The figures are carved in relief, showcasing the intricate details of Hammurabi's attire and the radiance of Shamash. The contrast between the figures and the background enhances the visual impact.
- **Inscription:** The laws are inscribed in Akkadian cuneiform script, with around 282 laws detailed on the stele. The text is divided into sections that cover various aspects of daily life and governance.

# Content Organization

The laws are organized into several categories, including:

1. Family Law: Addressing marriage, divorce, and inheritance.
2. Property Law: Covering land ownership, contracts, and theft.
3. Commercial Law: Regulating trade, loans, and commerce.
4. Criminal Law: Outlining punishments for crimes committed against individuals or the state.

Each law typically follows a formulaic structure that includes a statement of the law, the punishment for its violation, and often, an indication of the social status of the involved parties.

## Thematic Analysis

The Code of Hammurabi encompasses several key themes that reflect the values and beliefs of Babylonian society.

### Justice and Retribution

The principle of "an eye for an eye" is one of the most quoted aspects of the Code. This retributive justice system indicates that the punishment should fit the crime, promoting a sense of fairness and accountability. The laws serve to:

- Deter Criminal Behavior: By establishing clear consequences, the Code aimed to discourage individuals from committing offenses.
- Maintain Order: The legal framework created by the Code sought to uphold social stability in a burgeoning civilization.

### Social Hierarchy and Inequality

The Code reflects the hierarchical nature of Babylonian society. Different laws apply to different social classes, which raises questions about the equitable application of justice. For example:

- Noble vs. Commoner: Punishments for crimes committed by nobles are generally less severe than those for commoners.
- Women's Rights: Although women have certain rights, they are still subordinate to men, as evidenced by laws governing marriage and property.

### The Role of the Ruler

The Code emphasizes the king's role as a protector of his people and the embodiment of justice. Hammurabi positions himself as a mediator between the gods and the citizens, suggesting that his

authority is divinely sanctioned. This connection to the divine not only legitimizes his rule but also reinforces the idea that adherence to the law is a religious duty.

## **Significance in Art History**

The Code of Hammurabi is crucial for understanding the evolution of legal systems and governance in human history. Its significance in art history can be observed through several lenses:

### **Influence on Subsequent Legal Codes**

The principles enshrined in the Code of Hammurabi laid the groundwork for future legal systems, influencing not only later Mesopotamian cultures but also civilizations such as:

- Ancient Rome: The Roman Twelve Tables share similarities with Hammurabi's Code in terms of structure and legal principles.
- Biblical Law: Many scholars argue that there are parallels between the Code and laws found in the Hebrew Bible, reflecting shared cultural practices in the ancient Near East.

### **Artistic Legacy**

The artistic representation of the Code of Hammurabi has inspired numerous works through the ages. The stele itself serves as a model for later legal monuments, emphasizing the importance of law in society. Its iconographic elements, particularly the depiction of the ruler receiving laws from a divine source, have influenced the portrayal of justice and governance in various artistic traditions.

### **Modern Interpretations**

In contemporary discussions, the Code serves as a reference point for analyzing modern legal and ethical dilemmas. It raises questions about justice, equity, and the role of law in society:

- Relevance to Human Rights: The Code's hierarchical approach to justice prompts debates about equality and human rights.
- Law and Morality: The distinction between legal obligations and moral imperatives remains a relevant discourse in modern legal theory.

## **Conclusion**

The Code of Hammurabi stands as a monumental achievement in both law and art, encapsulating the complexities of life in ancient Babylon. Its significance extends beyond the realm of legal history, influencing art, philosophy, and governance through the ages. As one of the earliest known written legal codes, it provides invaluable insights into the values and beliefs of a civilization that laid the

foundations for future societies. Understanding the Code of Hammurabi enriches our appreciation of the interplay between law, art, and culture, making it a critical subject in the study of AP Art History.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What is the significance of the Code of Hammurabi in art history?**

The Code of Hammurabi is significant in art history as it represents one of the earliest and most complete written legal codes, showcasing the intersection of law, society, and art. Its stele, with detailed carvings, exemplifies the use of visual art to convey complex societal norms and values in ancient Mesopotamia.

### **How does the artwork of the Code of Hammurabi reflect the social hierarchy of ancient Babylon?**

The artwork of the Code of Hammurabi, particularly the relief depicting Hammurabi receiving the laws from the god Shamash, illustrates the divine authority and kingship, reinforcing the social hierarchy where the king serves as a mediator between the gods and the people, legitimizing his rule and the laws he enforces.

### **What materials were used in the creation of the Code of Hammurabi stele, and why are they important?**

The Code of Hammurabi stele was typically made from basalt, a durable stone that allowed for the preservation of the text and reliefs over millennia. The choice of material reflects the importance of the laws inscribed, symbolizing their permanence and the seriousness with which they were regarded in society.

### **In what ways did the Code of Hammurabi influence later legal systems and art representations?**

The Code of Hammurabi influenced later legal systems by establishing an early model for codified laws that emphasized justice and retribution. In art, it inspired subsequent depictions of law and justice across cultures, often illustrating the relationship between rulers, laws, and divine sanction.

### **What artistic techniques are evident in the relief sculptures of the Code of Hammurabi?**

The relief sculptures of the Code of Hammurabi exhibit techniques such as hierarchical scale, where figures are sized according to their importance, and high relief carving, which gives a sense of depth and realism. These techniques enhance the narrative quality of the scenes depicted, making the laws more accessible and engaging to the viewer.

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