

66 A KING'S HYMN TO HIMSELF, "THE WEDDING OF AMURRU," AND HAMMURABI'S LAWS

## LAYING DOWN THE LAW HAMMURABI AND THE FIRST LAWMAKERS

King Shulgi was so proud of himself that while other people were writing hymns for the gods, he wrote one to honor himself:

That my name be established unto distant days and that it leave not the mouth of men,

that my praise be spread wide in the land, . . .

I, the runner, rose in my strength, all set for the course,

and from Nippur to Ur, I resolved to travel . . .

Nippur was a city 100 miles north of Ur. Shulgi claimed that he had run these 100 miles, then turned around and run home again—in a huge storm—all in one day.

What a sight it must have been to see the king himself running along the soggy dirt roads that bordered the river, pounded by the rain and with mud splashing his legs! Shulgi bragged: "My black-headed people . . . marveled at me." But *did* Shulgi really run two hundred miles in the rain? Or did he make up the story to glorify himself? Actually, he could have written the story himself without a scribe's help. Unlike almost any other Mesopotamian king before



King Shulgi carries a basket of bricks on his head. Though he probably didn't do any building himself, the king commanded that bronze images like this one be placed in the foundations of new temples.

or after him, Shulgi could read and write.

King Shulgi came to the throne in 2094 BCE and Mesopotamia flourished during his 48-year reign. He ruled from Ur during the time known as the Third Dynasty of Ur, or Ur III for short. The Ur III kings, including Shulgi, emphasized the peaceful aspects of their reigns in their inscriptions: they built the first ziggurats (high temple towers for the gods, much taller than the earlier temples on platforms), and they made the roads safe so that people could move between cities without fear of being robbed. Shulgi encouraged trade by setting standards for certain weights and measures. This **standardization** meant that people all over the kingdom could say the same thing and *mean* the same thing.

Under Shulgi, scribes kept track of every tax that was paid, every payment made to a worker, and every donation sent to a temple. We don't know how many clay tablets the scribes filled with these records, but thousands upon thousands have survived.

A U.S. dollar is the same amount of money in Maine and California. And a kilogram is the same in Rome and Beijing. These weights and measurements are standardized—all the same.



Iraqis have partly rebuilt the solid mud-brick ziggurat at Ur with long outside staircases and massive walls. The original upper stories and the small shrine at the top are missing.



Even though King Shulgi seems to have had a big ego, he was also concerned about the poor and weak people in his kingdom. He boasted in an inscription “I did not deliver the orphan to the rich. I did not deliver the widow to the mighty... I got rid of hatred [and] violence, and... established justice in the land.” In fact, Shulgi put together a list of laws, written on clay tablets. The fragments that survive record the first 37 laws—the earliest written laws the world has ever seen. One of them says that if a man lies in court, “he shall weigh and deliver 15 shekels of silver.”

Fifteen shekels was a heavy fine. A later example gives us some idea of exactly how heavy: in 1800 BCE, about three hundred years after Shulgi’s reign, a hired laborer earned one shekel of silver for a month’s work. So a laborer who was fined 15 shekels would have owed the court his full pay for 450 days, maybe more.

Shulgi’s laws named all sorts of crimes: chopping off another man’s foot, knocking out someone’s tooth, and even cutting off a person’s nose. In each law, a punishment was listed for the crime. The fine for breaking a bone was 60 shekels—four times the fine for lying in court. By setting up these strict punishments, Shulgi’s laws discouraged people from taking justice into their own hands. If a person was robbed or hurt, he was supposed to go to the judge, explain his case, produce evidence, and then leave the verdict and punishment to the officials.

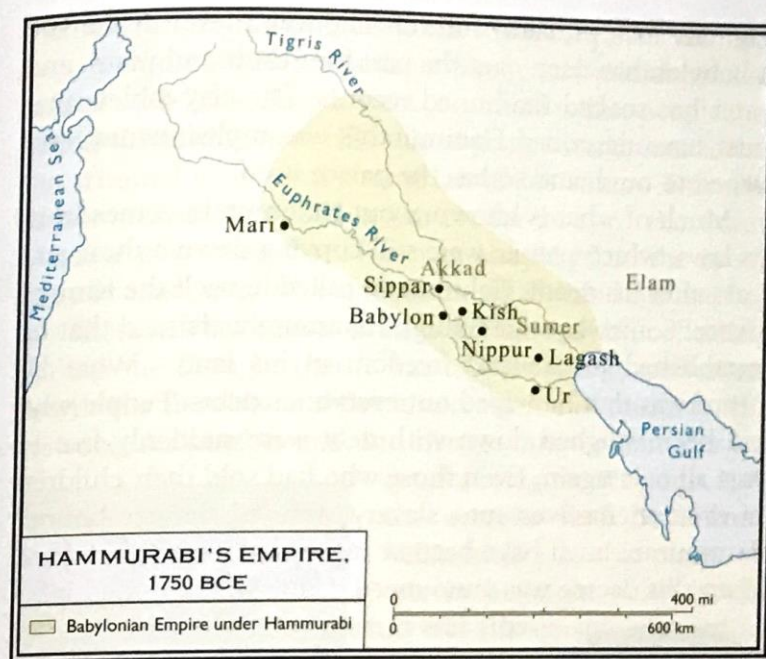
Like Sargon’s empire before it, the Ur III kingdom eventually collapsed, and invaders poured into the country. These invaders were the Amorites, whose name means “westerners,” though scholars aren’t sure exactly where they came from—only that it was somewhere west of Ur. The Amorites had been a threat during Shulgi’s reign, and he had ordered the construction of a long wall to keep them out. But the wall did no good.

When the Amorites arrived, many Mesopotamians thought the end of their civilization had come. One ancient author described an Amorite as a barbarian, “a tent dweller... who eats raw meat; who has no house during the days of his life, and is not buried on the day of his death.” But the

66 Shulgi, Prologue to the Laws, 21st century BCE

66 Shulgi, Laws, 21st century BCE

66 “The Wedding of the Amurru,” Iraq, 2nd millennium BCE



Amorites didn’t bring an end to Mesopotamian prosperity. Instead they became a part of it. Soon, the newcomers merged into city life, worshipping the local gods and learning to speak the local language.

One of these Amorite kings, Hammurabi, ruled the city of Babylon for almost 43 years, from 1792 to 1750 BCE. In his 29th year on the throne, Hammurabi started building an empire. Eventually, all of Mesopotamia fell under his control. His empire was the biggest Mesopotamia had seen since the dynasty of Sargon, almost six hundred years earlier. Like Sargon, Hammurabi claimed he had conquered his enemies because the gods supported him. He probably hoped to convince his victims that the gods *wanted* him to rule over them. Even though his armies must have killed thousands of people, Hammurabi described himself as the “shepherd of the people, whose deeds are pleasing to the goddess Ishtar.”

Some of Hammurabi’s letters have survived the years, and documents from other kingdoms of the same period also refer to him. But most of the records from Hammurabi’s



#### MEANWHILE IN EGYPT, AND LATER IN THE LEVANT

Hammurabi was not the only leader to use the image of the good shepherd. A 20th century BCE inscription from ancient Egypt describes King Sesostri I in the same way: “He [the sun god] appointed me shepherd of this land... He gave to me what he protects...” Later, according to the Gospel of John in the New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth told his disciples: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep.”

66 Laws of Hammurabi, around 1755 BCE

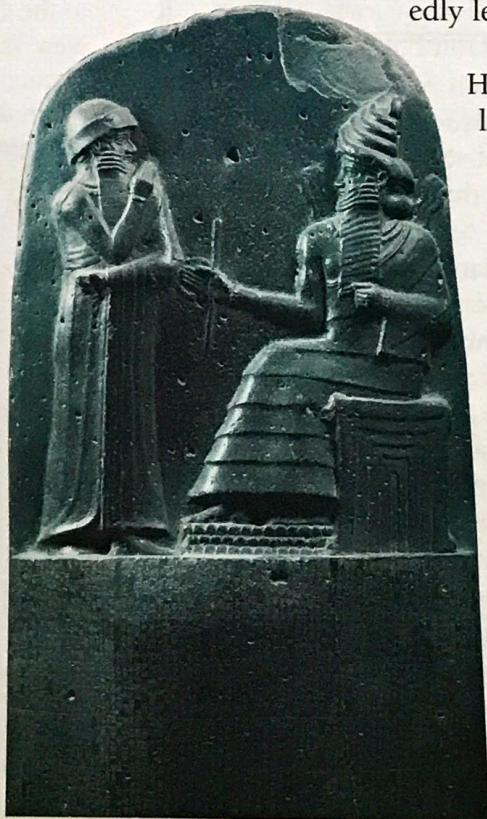


reign are lost, probably forever. The water level in the soil at Babylon has risen over the past four thousand years, and water has soaked the buried records. The clay tablets that must have described Hammurabi's accomplishments have turned to mud, and so has the palace itself.

Much of what is known about Hammurabi comes from his laws, which people were still copying down a thousand years after his death. Hammurabi called himself the King of Justice. Somewhat like Shulgi, Hammurabi claimed that he "established justice and freedom in his land." What he meant was that he wiped out everyone's debts. People who had been weighed down with debt were suddenly free to start all over again. Even those who had sold their children or even themselves into slavery were no longer bound. Hammurabi must have become an instant hero to the poor when this decree was announced. (The rich were undoubtedly less pleased.)

In his crowning achievement, Hammurabi collected about 282 laws inscribed on a monument that is seven and a half feet high. The laws were written in stone and topped by an image of Hammurabi standing in front of Shamash, the god of justice. In this sculpture, Hammurabi stands in a gesture of prayer, as he receives a rod and a ring—symbols of kingly authority—from Shamash. Even someone who couldn't read would have understood the meaning: Hammurabi had the right to rule and to judge because Shamash had chosen him for these duties.

Hammurabi's laws covered many different kinds of possible court cases: divorce, argu-



With one hand raised in prayer, King Hammurabi stands before Shamash as the god hands him two symbols of his power: a rod and a ring. This carving tops a stone monument that includes Hammurabi's laws.

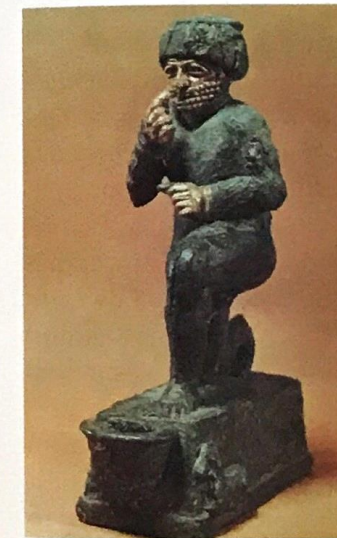
66 Hammurabi, 1792 BCE

ments over property, duties to the king, as well as criminal acts, including theft and assault. Shulgi had punished most crimes with fines. Hammurabi continued to fine people, but added something new. His style of justice sometimes forced the criminal to suffer the same fate as his victim. This type of law is often described as "an eye for an eye." For example, one law states that "If a man should blind the eye of another man, they [the authorities] shall blind his eye."

There's no law against murder in Hammurabi's collection. Perhaps he thought that it was too obvious to be written down. His first law is about an *accusation* of murder: "If a man accuses another man and charges him with murder but

cannot bring proof against him, the accuser shall be killed." With such a law in place, no one in his right mind would accuse his enemy of a crime unless he could prove it. The underlying message is this: the court system is powerful and everybody had better respect it—or pay the price.

Shulgi would have been disappointed. After all his efforts at making a name for himself—running across the country, writing hymns to himself, creating laws—it's Hammurabi who got all the credit. Many textbooks name Hammurabi as the inventor of the world's first laws. But it



This bronze figure of a man kneeling in prayer might represent Hammurabi. His face and hands are plated in gold.

isn't true. Hammurabi just had the good sense to carve his laws into stone. Most of Shulgi's laws, written in clay, were lost. The few that remain were, for decades, mistakenly credited to Shulgi's father and became known as the Laws of Ur-Nammu.

Poor Shulgi. He tried for glory, but in the long run, he failed.

66 Laws of Hammurabi, around 1755 BCE

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#### NAME THAT YEAR

In Hammurabi's time, the years had names instead of numbers. Each year, the king chose an event, such as his victory over the Elamites, and named the year for it. The 30th year of Hammurabi's reign became "The year: Hammurabi, the king, the powerful one, beloved of Marduk, by the supreme power of the greatest gods overthrew the army of Elam . . . he also made firm the foundations of Sumer and Akkad." The next year, he celebrated his victory over the kingdom of Larsa, south of Babylon. These year-names are found on many dated documents. Through them, we can trace the spread of Hammurabi's empire, year by year.