

Hammurabi's Code

Primary Source Reading

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Hammurabi's Code was not the first set of laws to be created or written down. Archaeologists have found Sumerian laws that are 300 years older, and even those aren't believed to be the very first. But Hammurabi's Code is still famous for a few big reasons. First, the laws are brief and amazingly strict. Hammurabi probably didn't invent the idea of retribution (harming someone in retaliation), but his laws were based on retribution at its purest form.

Notes

Second, the laws themselves are beautifully presented. The entire code was etched into a polished black basalt stone nearly eight-feet tall. At the top are two figures: the king of Babylon (Hammurabi) bowing before a god. Below that, the 282 laws were etched in cuneiform. The statue stood in a public place in Babylon so that everyone could know what laws governed them. Sounds pretty fair, right? The tricky part was that hardly anyone could read.

2. Rome's Twelve Tables are a set of ancient laws at the foundation of Roman law. They formed the basis of the constitution of the Roman Republic (509-44 BCE). Originally, the Republic's laws were kept secret, which allowed people of the upper classes to punish plebeians (a member of the lower-class) for almost anything. Several plebeians finally convinced the Republic's leaders that laws should be written down for all to see, and the leaders agree to create the Twelve Tables.

Notes

The Twelve Tables are a lot like the United States' Bill of Rights. They didn't list all of the laws or every right that a person had; they just included the major ones. The laws were strict and included some extremely harsh penalties, so it was good that people finally knew what they could be punished for. Many scholars believe that the laws were written in rhyme so that every Roman could remember them. Scholars aren't positive about this, however, because the original tables themselves were destroyed during an invasion of Rome. What survive are brief excerpts quoted by other authors.

