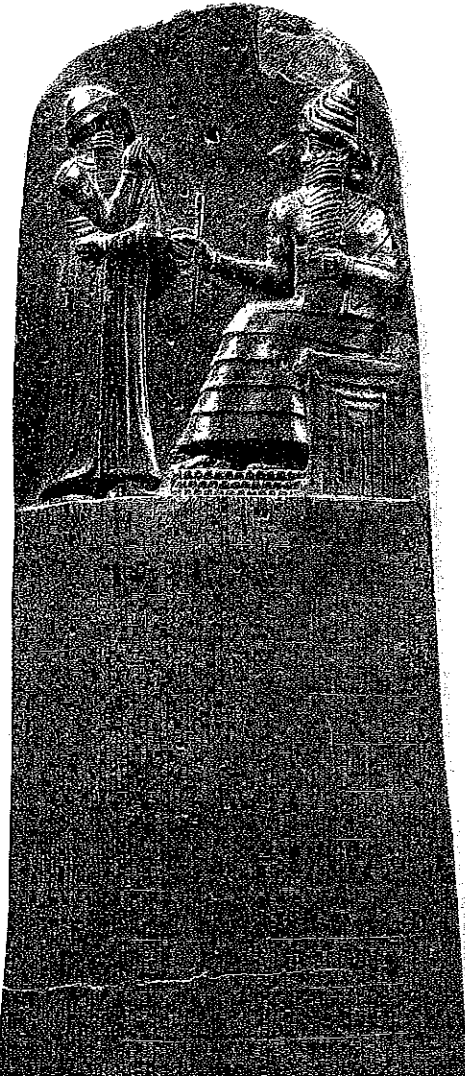




"A Tooth for a Tooth"

Laws are an essential part of any civilization. Around 1750 B.C., the ruler of ancient Mesopotamia wrote down on a stone pillar all the laws that the people throughout his empire had to obey.

The larger and more complex a society becomes, the more its people need laws to keep their community running smoothly and safely. The ancient Mesopotamian king Hammurabi ruled one of the world's first empires. To improve the well-being of his people and "to keep the strong from harming the weak," he created a code of 282 laws. We know



about Hammurabi's Code because he carved many of his laws on a pillar of hard black stone 8 feet (2.5 meters) high. It was found by a French archaeologist in 1901.

Hammurabi's Code is the most complete legal system that has survived from ancient Mesopotamia. How did his laws work? In general, Hammurabi made the punishment match the crime. For example, a man who knocked out another person's teeth should have his own tooth knocked out.

Hammurabi's Code dealt harshly with crime. Breaking into someone's house, for instance, was punishable by death. Men who struck their fathers had their hands cut off. The Code of Hammurabi does not mention prison as a punishment for crime.

Many of Hammurabi's 282 laws covered noncriminal matters, such as marriages and business contracts. Today, these are called civil laws, which deal with people's rights. Some of Hammurabi's civil laws explained the conditions under which a married couple could separate.

Some of his laws dealt with what we call consumer protection today. For example, if an animal doctor performed

Hammurabi had his laws carved onto this stone pillar, or *stèle*. The scene at the top shows Hammurabi (standing) receiving the laws from the sun god Shamash.

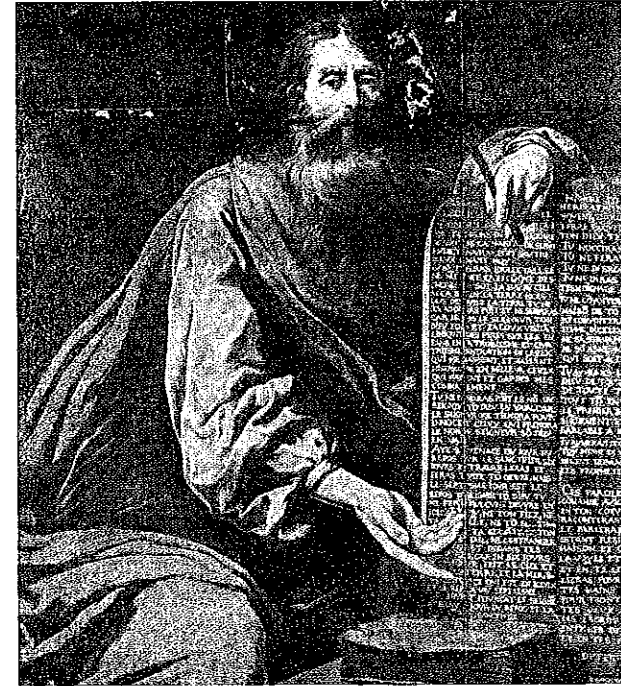
The most famous law code in Western civilization is the Ten Commandments. According to the Bible, it was originally written on stone like Hammurabi's Code. But in other important ways, the two law codes are different.

Hammurabi's Code is a collection of decisions that the king made in response to specific cases. For example, Hammurabi says that if someone steals property from a burning house while helping to put out the fire, the thief shall be burned to death. By contrast, the Ten Commandments are more general. For example, one says, "Thou shalt not steal." It does not describe a specific type of theft or indicate a punishment.

Hammurabi's Code provides different rulings depending on the social class of the people involved in the case. For example, if a free man strikes another free man, he must pay a fine.

an operation on an ox and killed it, he had to pay the owner a fourth of its value. If a shipbuilder's boat leaked, he had to take it apart and make it waterproof at his own expense.

For more information about Hammurabi, see page 60.



The Jewish leader Moses with the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written

If a slave strikes a free man, the slave's ear must be cut off. The Ten Commandments makes no such distinctions. All of its laws apply equally to everyone.

The Code of Hammurabi is the most important law code to survive from ancient Mesopotamia. Its laws provide a detailed picture of Mesopotamian civilization and mark the beginning of formal legal systems in human society.