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Ancient Sumer and Hammurabi Block:

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**Ancient Sumer**The Sumerians inhabited southern Mesopotamia from 3000-2000 B.C. The origins of the Sumerians is unclear -- what is clear is that Sumerian civilization dominated Mesopotamian law, religion, art, literature and science for nearly seven centuries.

[](http://www.historyguide.org/ancient/cuneiform.html)The greatest achievement of Sumerian civilization was their [CUNEIFORM](http://www.historyguide.org/ancient/cuneiform.html) ("wedge-shaped") system of writing. Using a reed stylus, they made wedge-shaped impressions on wet clay tablets which were then baked in the sun. Once dried, these tablets were virtually indestructible and the several hundred thousand tablets which have been found tell us a great deal about the Sumerians. Originally, Sumerian writing was pictographic, that is, scribes drew pictures of representations of objects. Each sign represented a word identical in meaning to the object pictured, although pictures could often represent more than the actual object.

The pictographic system proved cumbersome and the characters were gradually simplified and their pictographic nature gave way to conventional signs that represented ideas. For instance, the sign for a star could also be used to mean heaven, sky or god. The next major step in simplification was the development of phonetization in which characters or signs were used to represent sounds. So, the character for water was also used to mean "in," since the Sumerian words for "water" and "in" sounded similar. With a phonetic system, scribes could now represent words for which there were no images (signs), thus making possible the written expression of abstract ideas.

The Sumerians used writing primarily as a form of record keeping. The most common cuneiform tablets record transactions of daily life: tallies of cattle kept by herdsmen for their owners, production figures, lists of taxes, accounts, contracts and other facets of organizational life in the community. Another large category of cuneiform writing included a large number of basic texts which were used for the purpose of teaching future generations of scribes. By 2500 B.C. there were schools built just for his purpose.

[](http://www.historyguide.org/ancient/sumer_res.html)The city-state was Sumer's most important political entity. The city-states were a loose collection of territorially small cities which lacked unity with one another. Each city-state consisted of an urban center and its surrounding farmland. The city-states were isolated from one another geographically and so the independence of each city-state became a cultural norm with important consequences. For instance, it was held that each city-state was the estate of a particular god: Nannar (moon) was said to have watched over the city-state of Ur; Uruk had An (sky), Sippar had Utu (sun) and Enki (earth) could be found at Eridu. Nippur, the earliest center of Sumerian religion, was dedicated to Enlil, god of wind (Enlil was supplanted by Marduk at Babylon). Each city-state was sacred since it was carefully guarded by and linked to a specific god or goddess. Located near the center of each city-state was a temple. Occupying several acres, this sacred area consisted of a ziggurat with a temple at the top dedicated to the god or goddess who "owned" the city. The temple complex was the true center of the community. The main god or goddess dwelt there symbolically in the form of a statue, and the ceremony of dedication included a ritual that linked the statue to the god or goddess and thus harnessed the power of the deity for the benefit of the city-state. Considerable wealth was poured into the construction of temples as well as other buildings used for the residences of priests and priestesses who attended to the needs of the gods. The priests also controlled all economic activities since the economy was "redistributive." Farmers would bring their produce to the the priests at the ziggurat. The priests would "feed" and "clothe" the gods and then redistribute the remainder to the people of the community.

With its rather large pantheon of gods and goddesses animating all aspects of life, Sumerian religion was polytheistic in nature. By far, the most important deities were An, Enlil, Enki and Ninhursaga. An was the god of the sky and hence the most important force in the universe. He was also viewed as the source of all authority including the earthly power of rulers and fathers alike. In one myth, the gods address them in the following manner:

*What you have ordered comes true!
The utterance of Prince and Lord is but what you have ordered, do agree with.
O An! your great command takes precedence, who could gainsay it?
O father of the gods, your command, the very foundations of heaven and earth, what god could spurn it?*

Enlil, god of wind, was considered the second greatest power of the universe and became the symbol of the proper use of force and authority on earth. As the god of wind, Enlil controlled both the fertility of the soil and destructive storms. This dual nature of Enlil inspired a justifiable fear of him:

*What has he planned? . . .
What is in my father's heart?
What is in Enlil's holy mind?
What has he planned against me in his holy mind?
A net he spread: the net of an enemy; a snare he set: the snare of an enemy.
He has stirred up the waters and will catch the fishes, he has cast his net, and will bring down the birds too.*

Enki was god of the earth. Since the earth was the source of life-giving waters, Enki was also god of rivers, wells, and canals. He also represented the waters of creativity and was responsible for inventions and crafts. Ninhursaga began as a goddess associated with soil, mountains, and vegetation. Eventually she was worshipped as a mother goddess, a "mother of all children," who manifested her power by giving birth to kings.

Although these four deities were supreme, there were numerous gods and goddesses below them. One group included the astral deities, who were all grandchildren and great-grandchildren of An. These included Utu, god of the sun, the moon god Nannar, and Inanna, goddess of the morning and evening star as well as of war and rain. Unlike humans, these gods and goddesses were divine and immortal. But they were not all-powerful since no one god had control over the entire universe. Furthermore, humans were capable of devising ways to discover the will of the gods and to influence them as well.

The relationship of human beings to the gods was based on subservience since, according to Sumerian myth, human beings were created to do the manual labor the gods were unwilling to do for themselves. As a consequence, humans were insecure since they could never be sure of the god's actions. But humans did make attempts to circumvent or relieve their anxiety by discovering the intentions of the gods; these efforts gave rise to the development of the arts of divination, which took a variety of forms. A common form, at least for kings and priests who could afford it, involved killing animals, such as sheep or goats, and examining their livers or other organs. Supposedly, features seen in the organs of the sacrificed animals foretold of events to come. Private individuals relied on cheaper divinatory techniques. These included interpreting patterns of smoke from burning incense or the pattern formed when oil was poured into water.

The Sumerian art of divination arose from a desire to discover the purpose of the gods. If people could decipher the signs that foretold events, the events would be predictable and humans could act wisely. But the Sumerians also developed cultic arts to influence good powers (gods and goddesses) whose decisions could determine human destiny and to ward off evil powers (demons). These cultic arts included ritualistic formulas, such as spells against evil spirits, or prayers or hymns to the gods to win their positive influence. Since only the priests knew the precise rituals, it is not difficult to understand the important role they exercised in a society dominated by a belief in the reality of spiritual powers.

**The Code of Hammurabi**Mesopotamian men and women viewed themselves as subservient to the gods and believed humans were at the mercy of the god's arbitrary decisions. To counter their insecurity, the Mesopotamians not only developed the arts of divination in order to understand the wishes of their gods, but also relieved some anxiety by establishing codes that regulated their relationships with one another. These law codes became an integral part of Mesopotamian society. Although there were early Sumerian law codes, the best-preserved Mesopotamian collection of law codes was that of Hammurabi (fl.18th century B.C.).

The [CODE OF HAMMURABI](http://www.historyguide.org/ancient/hammurabi.html) reveals a society of strict justice. Penalties for criminal offenses were severe and varied according to the wealth of the individual. According to the code, there were three social classes in Babylonia: an upper class of nobles (government officials, priests, and warriors), the class of freemen (merchants, artisans, professionals, and wealthy farmers), and a lower class of slaves. An offense against a member of the upper class was punished with more severity than the same offense against a member of a lower class. The principle of retaliation ("an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth") was fundamental. It was applied in cases where members of the upper class committed criminal offenses against their own social equals. But for offenses against members of the lower classes, a money payment was made instead.

Mesopotamian society, like any other society, had its share of crime. Burglary was common. If a person stole goods belonging to the temples, he was put to death, and so was the person who received the stolen goods. If the private property of an individual was stolen, the thief had to make a tenfold restitution. If he could not do so he was put to death. An offender caught attempting to loot a burning house was to be "thrown into that fire."

Private individuals were often responsible for bringing charges before a court of law. To insure that accusations were not brought lightly, the accuser in cases of murder was responsible for proving his case against the defendant. If the accuser could not, he was put to death. Providing false testimony in a murder case meant the same fate.

Hammurabi's code took seriously the responsibilities of all public officials. The governor of an area and city officials were expected to catch burglars. If they failed to do so, public officials in which the crime took place had to replace the lost property. If murderers were not found, the officials had to pay a fine to the relatives of the murdered person. Soldiers were also expected to fill their duties. If a soldier hired a substitute to fight for him, he was put to death, and a substitute was given control of his estate.

The law code also extended into the daily life of the ordinary citizen. Builders were held responsible for the buildings they constructed. If a house collapsed and caused the death of its owner, the builder was put to death. Goods destroyed by the collapsed must also be replaced and the house itself rebuilt at the builder's expense.

Slavery was a common feature of Mesopotamian society. Slaves were obtained by war; others were criminals. Crimes such as striking one's older brother and kicking one's mother were punished by condemnation to slavery. A man could pay his debts by selling both his children and wife into slavery for a specified length of time. One could become a slave simply by going into debt.

Slaves were used in temples, in public buildings, and in the homes of private individuals. Most temple slaves were women who did domestic chores. Royal slaves were used to construct buildings and fortifications. Slaves owned by private citizens performed domestic chores. The laws were harsh for those slaves who tried to escape or who were disobedient. Slaves did possess a number of privileges: they could hold property, participate in business, marry free man or women, and eventually purchased their own freedom.

The number of laws in Hammurabi's code dedicated to land and commerce reveal the importance of agriculture and trade in Mesopotamian society. Numerous laws dealt with questions of landholding, such as the establishment of conditions for renting farmland. Tenant farming was the basis of Mesopotamian agriculture. Ten farmers paid their annual rent in crops rather than money. Laws concerning land-use and irrigation were especially strict. If a landowner or tenant failed to keep dikes in good repair he was required to pay for the grain that was destroyed. If he could not pay he was sold into slavery and his goods sold, the proceeds of which were divided among the injured parties. Rates of interest on loans were watched carefully. If the lender raised his rate of interest after a loan was made, he lost the entire amount of the loan. The Code of Hammurabi also specified the precise wages of laborers and artisans.

The largest number of laws in the Code of Hammurabi were dedicated to marriage and family. Parents arranged marriages for their children. After marriage, the party signed a marriage contract. Without this contract, no one was considered legally married. While the husband provided a bridal payment, the woman's parents were responsible for a dowry to the husband. Dowries were carefully monitored and governed by regulations.

Mesopotamian society was a patriarchal society, and so women possessed far fewer privileges and rights in their marriage. A woman's place was at home and failure to fulfill her duties was grounds for divorce. If she was not able to bear children, her husband could divorce her but he had to repay the dowry. If his wife tried to leave the home in order to engage in business, her husband could divorce her and did not have to repay the dowry. Furthermore, if his wife was a "gadabout, . . . neglecting her house [and] humiliating her husband," she could be drowned.

Women were guaranteed some rights, however. If a woman was divorced without good reason she received the dowry back. A woman could seek divorce and get her dowry back if her husband was unable to show that she had done anything wrong. The mother also chose a son to whom an inheritance would be passed.

Sexual relations were strictly regulated as well. Husbands, but not wives, were permitted sexual activity outside marriage. A wife caught committing adultery was pitched into the river. Incest was strictly forbidden. If a father committed incestuous relations with his daughter, he would be banished. Incest between a son and his mother resulted in both being burned.

Fathers ruled their children as well as their wives. Obedience was expected: "If a son has struck his father, they shall cut off his hand." If a son committed a serious enough offense, his father could disinherit him. It should be clear that the Code of Hammurabi covered virtually every aspect of an individual's life. Although scholars have questioned the extent to which these laws were actually employed in Babylonian society, the Code of Hammurabi provides us an important glimpse into the values of Mesopotamian civilization.