

Reading

1 Read the article about the *Stele of Hammurabi*.

Ancient laws

In 1901, while excavating an ancient archaeological site in the Middle East, a French Egyptologist found a large carved black stone, broken into three pieces. Called the *Stele of Hammurabi*, language experts soon found that the stone, dating from around 1754 BCE, recorded what was then the earliest known example of a written legal system. It was, in fact, one of the oldest pieces of writing of any length in the world. It consisted of 282 laws which established standards for business transactions and set out fines and punishments in an early justice system.

The laws had been carved into a single piece of basalt, a very hard stone, that has preserved the writing for nearly 4,000 years. The stone was the work of King Hammurabi, who reigned in Babylon (in modern-day Iraq) from 1792 to 1750 BCE. Displayed in a public place, so everyone could see the laws and nobody could claim ignorance of them, most of the seven-foot-five-inch (2.2-metre) monument is covered with cuneiform script, setting out the laws in clearly organized groups. At the top of the stone is a two-and-a-half-foot carving of Hammurabi, standing to receive the law – symbolized by a measuring stick.

The laws are remarkably sophisticated and show a detailed justice system. Many of them relate to business, for example, setting out prices for goods and wages for different professions, including a sort of ancient 'minimum wage' for manual laborers. Other sections address crimes like assault or theft, or issues relating to family relationships, such as adoption, marriage or divorce.

The laws include many legal concepts that we consider to be at the foundation of modern society. It is one of the earliest examples of the idea that people are innocent until proved guilty, and that the accuser needs to provide evidence to prove the guilt of the accused. Some of the best-known laws from Hammurabi's code are an early example of the type of justice we often refer to as 'an eye for an eye': *If a man destroys the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye. If one break a man's bone, they shall break his bone.* Some of these attitudes seem brutal to modern eyes.

The laws also show that Babylonian society did not consider all people to be equal. Punishments varied according to the gender and social status of the person committing the crime, as well as the victim. In addition, the payments set out for services also depended on income and social status, so a doctor's fee for treating a wound would be either ten, five or two units of currency depending on the status of the patient.

In the 120 years since the discovery of the stele, older evidence of similar legal systems has been discovered, in particular, two Sumerian legal documents dating back to 2100 and 1930 BCE, suggesting that the Hammurabi code may in fact have come from an earlier source, rather than being an original set of ideas. Some people believe that Hammurabi sent out representatives to collect existing laws, which he then put together to create his own legal framework. Whatever the truth, the Hammurabi stele remains the most comprehensive overview we have of laws and social attitudes in this ancient period of history and in this part of the world.

carved (*adj*): cut into stone

cuneiform (*n*): relating to a writing system used in ancient times in the Middle East

assault (*n*): the crime of attacking someone physically

foundation (*n*): the most basic part of something from which the rest develops

brutal (*adj*): violent and cruel

2 Complete the Exam Task.

Exam TASK

For questions 1-6, choose the answer (A, B, C or D) which you think fits best according to the text.

- 1 The *Stele of Hammurabi* is special because
 - A it was the oldest object ever found in an archaeological site.
 - B it shows us the rules people created thousands of years ago.
 - C it is longer than any other piece of ancient writing.
 - D it contained more ancient laws than anything else discovered.
- 2 Originally, the single stone showed
 - A King Hammurabi dictating his laws.
 - B the place where it used to be displayed.
 - C a list of business transactions in cuneiform script.
 - D official regulations, arranged in a clear way.
- 3 The article says that the *Stele* included legal information on
 - A what to do if it was ever stolen.
 - B how to train people in different jobs.
 - C ending a marriage.
 - D where people could safely put their money.
- 4 The *Stele* shows us that ancient societies had modern-seeming ideas, including the idea that
 - A people who are accused of a crime are not necessarily criminals.
 - B if someone is guilty of a crime, then they should be punished.
 - C we should avoid harming people, whether or not they have harmed us.
 - D treating someone in a very strict or severe way is wrong.
- 5 From studying the *Stele*, it seems that Babylonian society
 - A did not respect doctors.
 - B did not deal with all criminals in the same way.
 - C thought that some people should not pay for services.
 - D used more than one currency.
- 6 According to the final paragraph, the *Stele of Hammurabi*
 - A may not show what people really did in ancient times.
 - B was widely copied by other societies.
 - C is unlikely to be the oldest set of laws ever created.
 - D was first written created in another form by King Hammurabi.