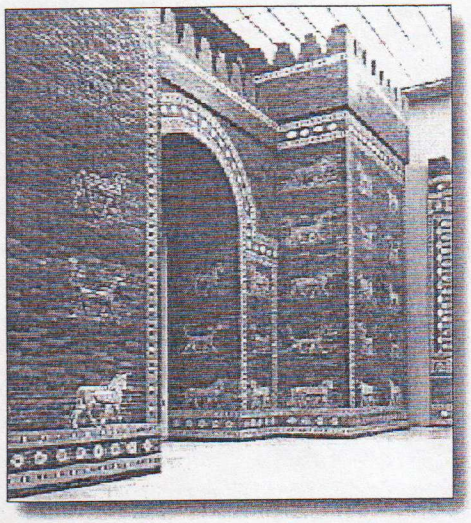
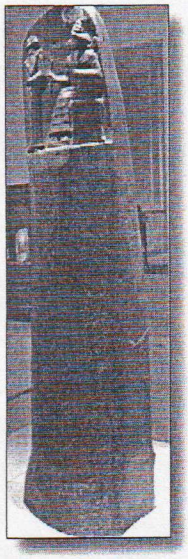
Babylonia


Reconstruction of the Gate of Ishtar

The Rise of Babylonia

One Akkadian town that developed in approximately 1900 B.C. was the small town of Babylon, located by the Euphrates River. Babylon grew in size and importance, and eventually its ruler, King Hammurabi, conquered all of Mesopotamia. This kingdom came to be known as **Babylonia**.

The Babylonian culture was similar to the Sumerian culture, which had existed in Mesopotamia before the Babylonians arrived. In fact, many people refer to the Babylonians as just a later development of the Sumerian culture. While the two civilizations existed at different times, they had many things in common. The Babylonians adopted the religion, literature, inventions, and practices of the Sumerians. Scholars and priests spoke the Sumerian language, although most Babylonians did not. Babylonia did make one important contribution of its own to the world. This contribution was a code of laws known as the ***Code of Hammurabi***.


The Code of Hammurabi engraved on a stele.

The Code of Hammurabi

Hammurabi was king of Babylonia from 1792 to 1750 B.C. He was a powerful leader with strong armies. He expanded Babylon by conquering other kingdoms. Hammurabi was also an efficient administrator. Hammurabi was not just concerned with his own comfort. He was also concerned with the lives of *all* of the people in his kingdom. He wanted everyone in his kingdom to have enough food, adequate housing, and to be treated fairly. In order to make sure that everyone was treated fairly, he had his scribes draw up a code of laws that are known as the *Code of Hammurabi*. Many of the laws were borrowed from the written laws of the Sumerians. Hammurabi's code was a little different from the laws devised by the Sumerians, however. Hammurabi's code added the element of revenge. In Sumeria, most who committed a crime were fined. The *Code of Hammurabi* did not impose a fine on criminals, but substituted the ancient punishment of *"an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."* In other words, if someone did something bad to a person, in many cases, the court would do the same thing to the wrongdoer.

BABYLONIAN CIVILIZATION AT A GLANCE

WHERE: On the Euphrates River
WHEN: 2000–1155 B.C.
ACHIEVEMENTS:
- Devised a code of laws, known as the *Code of Hammurabi,* designed to protect the weak
- Studied astronomy
- Built beautiful buildings as well as the Gate of Ishtar and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon

Some laws in the code seem very extreme and cruel. For example, if a son slapped his father, the son's hands would be cut off. If a man killed another man's son, then his son would be killed. While this may seem harsh by today's standards, before the code was written and followed, punishment was often decided by priests and judges who imposed punishments even more harsh. Death was a common punishment for even the most minor offenses. So these laws were not meant to be cruel, but to be fair.

The Code did distinguish between classes of people. A person's punishment depended on who was wronged. For

example, if a man put out the eye of another man, his eye would then be put out. But if he put out the eye of a freed man (a former slave), he would pay one gold mina. If he put out the eye of a man's slave, he would then have to pay one-half of the slave's value.

Astronomy

Law was not the only interest of the Babylonians. They studied astronomy and also believed in astrology. **Astronomy** is the study of the universe, including the movement of the stars and planets. **Astrology** is the belief that the positions and movements of the planets and stars can affect or predict life on Earth. While we separate these two areas today, the Babylonians did not.

The Babylonians not only watched the stars and heavens, they kept records of events, such as when an eclipse occurred. They were able to measure time by studying the movements of the celestial bodies. The priests used their knowledge of planets and the stars as part of their religion. The priests claimed that by studying the celestial bodies, they could tell the future. They were constantly looking at the skies, making horoscopes and predictions based on what they saw. A **horoscope** is a prediction of a person's future based on a diagram of the planets and stars at a given moment, such as birth.

Nebuchadnezzar II

About 1,000 years after the death of Hammurabi, King Nebuchadnezzar II came to power. By this time, Babylon was part of the Chaldean Empire, which came to power after the Assyrian Empire was destroyed. Nebuchadnezzar ruled Babylon from 605 to 562 B.C., and under his leadership, Babylon grew. At this time, Babylon had two structures that were so impressive they were known throughout the civilized world. The first was the beautifully decorated wall surrounding Babylon. On top of the wall were towers for guards who could watch for approaching enemies. This wall was wide enough for a four-horse chariot to be driven on it. The most impressive gate in the wall was the **Gate of Ishtar**. Ishtar was a goddess, and the gate named in her honor was made of colorful glazed enamel bricks with pictures of animals. The gate was so beautiful that at one time it was considered as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was later replaced on the list by the Lighthouse at Alexandria.

The second structure built by Nebuchadnezzar to gain worldwide fame was the **Hanging Gardens of Babylon.** The Hanging Gardens is still considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was built to please Nebuchadnezzar's wife, Amytis. It was a building consisting of several terraces, one above the other. Each terrace was planted with trees and flowers from around the country. Pools and fountains were also built into the structure. The Babylonians developed an irrigation system to raise water from the Euphrates River to the Gardens. Exactly how this irrigation system worked is unknown, but later writers referred to the system as "water engines."

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon

Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by his son in 562 B.C. who was assassinated three years later. Within a few years, Babylon was invaded by the Persians, and Babylon became part of the Persian Empire.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Knowledge Check

Matching

_____ 1. Babylonia
_____ 2. Code of Hammurabi
_____ 3. astronomy
_____ 4. astrology
_____ 5. horoscope
_____ 6. Gate of Ishtar
_____ 7. Hanging Gardens of Babylon

a. the belief that the positions and movements of the stars and planets can affect or predict life on Earth
b. a prediction of a person's future based on a diagram of the stars and planets at a given moment
c. the study of the universe, including the movement of the stars and planets
d. the most impressive opening in the wall around Babylon; named in honor of a goddess
e. a set of laws and punishments developed by the king of Babylonia
f. kingdom that covered all of Mesopotamia, ruled by King Hammurabi
g. building with irrigated terraces planted with trees and flowers and having pools and fountains; one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World

Multiple Choice

8. From where did the Babylonians adopt most of their culture?
   a. the Sumerians
   b. the Egyptians
   c. their own ideas
   d. the Persians

9. A man put out the eye of another man. The punishment depended on the class of the victim. For which class of victim was the punishment one gold mina?
   a. a slave
   b. a man of equal rank
   c. a freed man
   d. a servant

Constructed Response

10. How was the Code of Hammurabi attempting to be fair? Use details from the reading selection to help support your answer.

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