

CHAPTER
2

Section 1

HISTORYMAKERS **Hammurabi**

Conquering King and Giver of Justice

"The great gods have called me, and I am indeed the good shepherd who brings peace. . . . I have carried in my bosom the people of Sumer and Akkad. Thanks to my good fortune they have prospered. I have not ceased to administer them in peace. By my wisdom I have harbored them."—Hammurabi's Code

King Hammurabi of Babylon stands alone among rulers of his day as both a dispenser of justice and a conqueror. He united much of Mesopotamia under the rule of Babylon and also created a famous code of laws.

Hammurabi became king in 1792 B.C. At the time Babylon controlled only a small area—lands within about 50 miles of the city. Babylon was just one among many city-states. Hammurabi was determined to expand his power and build an empire in Mesopotamia. Most of his military efforts aimed at winning control of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which brought water to his people's crops.

The king began by forming an alliance with the king of Larsa, to the south. Together they defeated a group called the Elamites. After conquering two cities to the south, Hammurabi moved north and east. Two decades later, he turned on his former ally and conquered Larsa. This brought the cities of ancient Sumer into his rule. Then he turned north again and defeated Marsi and Assyria.

The empire did not last long after his death in 1750 B.C., but his work had a major impact on the region. Before Hammurabi, the center of Mesopotamian culture had been Sumer. After his rule, Babylon became the core of that culture.

Hammurabi's other great achievement was his code of laws, which was discovered in the early 1900s by a team of archaeologists at work on the ancient site of Susa, in modern Iran. They uncovered an eight-foot-high pillar of stone, or stele. The black stone was polished bright and engraved with ancient cuneiform writing. The stele included an image as well—a portrait of King Hammurabi receiving the code from Marduk, a principal god of Babylon.

The writing on the stele is divided into three parts. The first part describes Hammurabi's conquests. The last offers the king's thoughts on justice. Most of the writing, though, is Hammurabi's Code. It is divided into 282 articles, each of which addresses a particular action. Each article states a particular event first, then gives a legal judgment to

fit the event. The first article shows the pattern: "If a man has brought an accusation of murder against another man, without providing proof: the accuser shall be put to death."

Jean Bottéro, who studies ancient Babylon, believes that the code is a record of Hammurabi's actions as a judge. Its purpose, he says, is to guide future kings in their own decisions. In the last part of the code, Hammurabi talks to those kings who will follow him. He tells them to "heed the words that I have written on this stele: that the monument may explain to [you] the way and the behavior to follow."

The code reveals much about the people of ancient Babylon. The articles are grouped into several sections, each of which deals with a common concern. The first five all have to do with lying and the next 20 with theft. Remaining topics include farm labor (25 articles), trade (24), and money and debts (15). The two largest sections cover wives and family (67) and the work of various professions (61). Hammurabi's Code does call for some harsh penalties—including the famous "eye for an eye." However, that penalty only applied when a person destroyed the eye of an aristocrat. If the victim was a common person or a slave, the penalty was only a fine. The code also reflects the fact that the society was led by men. Fathers dominated families and had complete control over their children until the children married. Much of the code, though, was less harsh than earlier laws. At the end of the text, the king declared his desire to "prevent the powerful from oppressing the weak [and] . . . give my land fair decisions."

Questions

- Determining Main Ideas** What were Hammurabi's two achievements?
- Making Inferences** Was Hammurabi concerned about public opinion? Explain your answer.
- Forming and Supporting Opinions** Would you say that Hammurabi was a just king? Why or why not?