

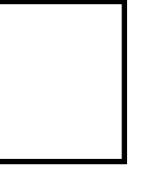
MESOPOTAMIA: THE FIRST PRISONS

WORLD
I.

DATE: 3200 - 1600 BCE

LOCATION: SUMER, AKKAD, BABYLON
(modern Iraq)

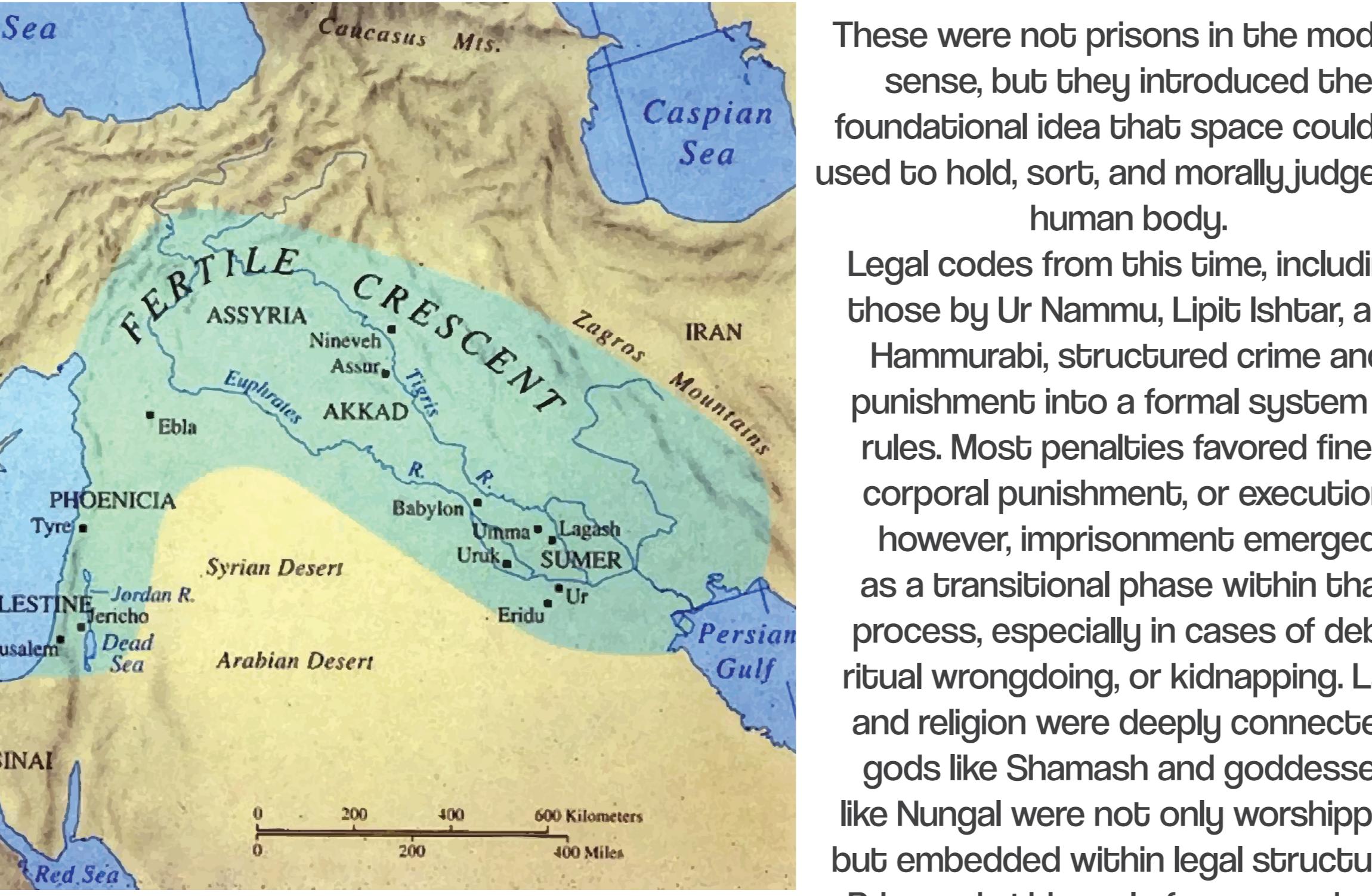
PART:



SHARE



Stele of Hammurabi
Basalt relief sculpture, dated around 1754 BCE, discovered in Susa and originally placed in Babylon. This carved monument shows King Hammurabi receiving a set of laws from the god Shamash, which established public justice as a divine and permanent order; it includes clauses on imprisonment, physical punishment, and property law, making it one of the oldest surviving legal codes tied directly to carceral practice.



Map of Ancient Mesopotamia
Modern visual reconstruction showing the location of major Sumerian and Akkadian cities across present-day Iraq. This map provides spatial context for the origins of legal confinement, marking early city-states like Ur, Nippur, Akkad, and Babylon where early carceral practices emerged through temple governance and written law.

This period marks the origin of confinement as a tool of governance, spirituality, and economic control. In ancient Mesopotamia, detention was not designed to punish or rehabilitate in the way it is today; instead, it was used to manage debt, delay judgment, or enforce labor. The state, often operating through temple institutions, created Houses of Confinement, which were spaces where the accused waited for trial, where debtors were held until payment was made, or where individuals labored in service of restitution.

These were not prisons in the modern sense, but they introduced the foundational idea that space could be used to hold, sort, and morally judge the human body.

Legal codes from this time, including those by Ur Nammu, Lipit Ishtar, and

Hammurabi, structured crime and punishment into a formal system of rules. Most penalties favored fines, corporal punishment, or execution; however, imprisonment emerged as a transitional phase within that process, especially in cases of debt, ritual wrongdoing, or kidnapping. Law and religion were deeply connected; gods like Shamash and goddesses like Nungal were not only worshipped, but embedded within legal structures.

Prisons, in this early form, were both physical and spiritual; they operated as sacred spaces of judgment.

What makes this era critical is its legacy. It represents the first documented use of confinement as a deliberate strategy of control. It transformed law from something oral and local into something written, codified, and enforced across urban centers. Even though the physical architecture of permanent prison buildings had not yet developed, the concept of carceral power had already formed. The Mesopotamian model set a precedent that would echo for centuries; imprisonment could serve the needs of law, economy, and religion by restraining the body through space.

C

uneliform Hymn to Nungal

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual

trial

rather than a punishment; it describes prison as a place of divine testing, where the soul

is refined through suffering before being judged

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual

trial

rather than a punishment; it describes prison as a place of divine testing, where the soul

is refined through suffering before being judged

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual

trial

rather than a punishment; it describes prison as a place of divine testing, where the soul

is refined through suffering before being judged

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual

trial

rather than a punishment; it describes prison as a place of divine testing, where the soul

is refined through suffering before being judged

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual

trial

rather than a punishment; it describes prison as a place of divine testing, where the soul

is refined through suffering before being judged

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual

trial

rather than a punishment; it describes prison as a place of divine testing, where the soul

is refined through suffering before being judged

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual

trial

rather than a punishment; it describes prison as a place of divine testing, where the soul

is refined through suffering before being judged

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual

trial

rather than a punishment; it describes prison as a place of divine testing, where the soul

is refined through suffering before being judged

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual

trial

rather than a punishment; it describes prison as a place of divine testing, where the soul

is refined through suffering before being judged

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual

trial

rather than a punishment; it describes prison as a place of divine testing, where the soul

is refined through suffering before being judged

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual

trial

rather than a punishment; it describes prison as a place of divine testing, where the soul

is refined through suffering before being judged

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual

trial

rather than a punishment; it describes prison as a place of divine testing, where the soul

is refined through suffering before being judged

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual

trial

rather than a punishment; it describes prison as a place of divine testing, where the soul

is refined through suffering before being judged

C

lay tablet with Sumerian script, created around 2000 BCE, most likely from the temple

ar

chives

N

ipper

T

his hymn addresses Nungal, the goddess of prisons, portraying incarceration as a spiritual