

Chapter 2: Mesopotamia: 2-2f Government and Social Structure
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2-2f Government and Social Structure

Government in Mesopotamia can be divided into two types: the theocracy (The rule by gods or their priests.) (rule by gods or their priests) of the early city-states of the Sumerians and the kingdom-empires of their successors, starting with Sargon the Great of Akkad. A king, assisted by noble officials and priests, ruled the cities. In Sumerian times the kings were no more than figureheads for the priests, but later they exercised decisive power.

The city, ruled by an elite headed by a king, was quite different in its social subdivisions from the village. In the village social equality was rarely challenged, and a leveling interdependency in everyday life was taken for granted. In the urban areas, on the contrary, distinctions among people were essential and expected to be displayed in many fashions and activities. Above all, the lower classes supported the far less numerous upper classes through both labor and taxes.

The Mesopotamian civilization apparently had just three classes of people, the first of which were the small groups of priests and noble landlords (often two branches of a single group) who were large landowners and had a monopoly on the higher offices of the city. Behind the priesthood stood the immense power of the high gods of the Sumerians and their successors: the deities of earth, sky, fire, freshwater, salt water, and storm.

The second group, the freemen, was the most numerous class. They did the bulk of the city's work and trading, and owned and worked most of the outlying farmlands. The relatively protected position of freemen is attested to by Hammurabi's law code and by the thousands of other documents recovered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from the ruins of Sumerian cities. Both priests and nobles depended on their skills and their labor, which was presumably given on a more or less voluntary basis.

Map 2.2

Hammurabi's Empire



Finally, the slaves—who at times were very numerous—often possessed considerable skills and were given some responsible positions. Freeman had some political rights, but slaves had none. As we will see repeatedly, slaves were common in most ancient societies, and enslavement was by no means the morally contemptible and personally humiliating condition it would frequently become later. Slavery had nothing much to do with race or ethnicity and everything to do with bad luck, such as being on the losing side of a war or falling into debt. Most slaves in Mesopotamia—and elsewhere—had run up debts that they could not otherwise repay. It was not at all uncommon for a person to become someone's slave for a few years and then resume freedom when the debt was paid. Hereditary slavery was rare. Many owners routinely freed their slaves in their wills as a mark of piety and benevolence.

Framing History

Law & Government: Hammurabi and the Mesopotamian Ideal of Kingship

The Emperor Hammurabi, who ruled Babylon in Mesopotamia from about 1792 to 1750 B.C.E., erected a monument to his reign on a stone pillar. Called the Stela of Hammurabi, the monument proclaimed his accomplishments and claims to greatness.

... When the deities of old
who allot the destinies of the world,
Gave the rule of human beings to [the god] Marduk,
[and] set him over all other deities,
... [and] made Babylon the foremost city-state in all the earth
and the capital of an everlasting kingdom,
with foundations laid strong as those of heaven and earth,
At that time I, Hammurabi,
the pious, god-fearing prince,
... was called forth by name for the welfare of the people:
To cause justice to appear in the world,
to destroy the evil and the wicked
so that the strong should not oppress the weak,
and to rise like Shamash to give light to the land.
... I, Hammurabi, the shepherd,
have gathered abundance and plenty,
have stormed the four quarters of the world,
have magnified the fame of Babylon,
and have elated the mind of Marduk my lord.
... To me has been given the authority,
and I have been faithful to Shamash.
I am like a god among kings,
endued with knowledge and wisdom.
I have provided plentiful offerings for the deities
... and built their temples.
I am pure of mind,

and the deities listen to my prayers.

I am the wise ruler

who bears the responsibility of government,

... who has attained the source of wisdom,

who has enlarged the kingdom,

and who has established pure sacrifices forever.

I am first of all kings;

I have conquered all peoples.

... I am the shepherd of the people

who causes the truth to appear,

guiding my flock rightly.

I am the pious prince,

deep in prayer to the great deities.

... I am the mighty king, the sun of Babylon,

who causes light to appear in the land,

who brings all the world to obedience.

I am the favorite of the deities.

When Marduk commanded me

... to establish justice for the people of the land

and to provide orderly government,

I set forth truth and justice throughout the land,

and caused the people to prosper.

The Hamurabi Stela.

The stela is about five feet high. Its top depicts King Hammurabi standing before the god Shamash.



Code of Hammurabi: the god Shamash dictating his laws to Hammurabi, King of Babylon, found at Susa, Iran, c.1750 BC (diorite) (for detail see 69507), Mesopotamian / Louvre, Paris, France / The Bridgeman Art Library

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Analyze and Interpret

Based on this memorial, what requirements did a king like Hammurabi have to satisfy to measure up to the Mesopotamian ideal of a great king?
From what god did a king have to obtain his right to govern?

Source: From the Hammurabi Stele, translated by Stan Rummel at the "Photo Gallery of Ancient Mesopotamia and Persia," by K. C. Hanson. The Ancient History Sourcebook.

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