Justice in Stone

Read a royal law collection as evidence of ancient Mesopotamia.

MWH.C.1.1.B "Describe ancient Mesopotamia's Code of Hammurabi as one of the earliest legal codes."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Read the passage, then underline two details that show what made Hammurabi's code a legal code. Circle one detail that shows why calling it an early code does not mean it was the first or that it treated everyone equally.

A King's Laws in Stone

1 Imagine walking into a busy Babylonian city nearly 3,800 years ago. Traders argue over grain, neighbors dispute land, and families seek help settling debts. In the eighteenth century BCE, King Hammurabi of Babylon had a collection of laws carved on a tall stone monument called a stele. The collection is known as the Code of Hammurabi. Its surviving text includes a prologue, hundreds of legal provisions, and an epilogue. The prologue presents the king as a ruler charged with bringing justice to the land. Displaying the laws in stone made royal ideas about order visible, even though many people could not read them.

2 Many provisions describe a situation and state a consequence: if a person does something, then a particular result follows. For example, a builder whose poorly built house collapses and kills its owner faces death under one provision. Another concerns a farmer who carelessly lets irrigation water flood a neighbor's field and must compensate for the lost grain. Such rules address problems in a society built around cities, farming, trade, and families. They also show that the code tried to set predictable consequences for disputes. Judges still had to consider evidence and decide how a provision applied to a case.

3 The code did not treat everyone alike. Penalties could depend on a person's social rank or whether the person was enslaved. A written code was not the same as equal justice. Nor was Hammurabi the first ruler to record laws: earlier Mesopotamian collections, including laws associated with Ur-Namma, survive. Historians call Hammurabi's code one of the earliest legal codes because it gathered many rules in writing in ancient Mesopotamia and survives in substantial form. It offers evidence of how a king described justice and how society ranked people, not proof that every rule was enforced in every dispute.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. What details show that Hammurabi's stele carried a legal code rather than only a story about a king?

2. Choose one problem in the passage. How did a provision connect a person's action to a legal consequence?

3. Why would it be inaccurate to describe the code as a promise of equal justice?

4. Why is "one of the earliest legal codes" more accurate than "the first legal code"?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write an 80 to 100 word museum label for a visitor who thinks written laws guarantee equal justice. Explain what the stele reveals about an ancient legal code, use one example from the passage, and explain why its age does not make it the first code or prove that everyone received equal treatment.

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PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Read the passage, then underline two details that show what made Hammurabi's code a legal code. Circle one detail that shows why calling it an early code does not mean it was the first or that it treated everyone equally. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	What details show that Hammurabi's stele carried a legal code rather than only a story about a king?	**It carried hundreds of legal provisions that described situations and stated consequences, along with a prologue and epilogue.**
2	Choose one problem in the passage. How did a provision connect a person's action to a legal consequence?	**A farmer who carelessly flooded a neighbor's field had to compensate for the lost grain. Also accept the builder example.**
3	Why would it be inaccurate to describe the code as a promise of equal justice?	**Penalties could depend on social rank or whether a person was enslaved, so the rules did not treat everyone alike.**
4	Why is "one of the earliest legal codes" more accurate than "the first legal code"?	**Earlier Mesopotamian law collections survive, including laws associated with Ur-Namma.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

This stone monument carried King Hammurabi's collection of laws in ancient Mesopotamia. Its rules connected actions to consequences: a farmer who carelessly flooded a neighbor's field had to replace lost grain. Such provisions show how a ruler pictured order and justice. The collection is one of the earliest surviving legal codes, but older Mesopotamian laws exist. Writing rules in stone did not make treatment equal: penalties varied by social rank. Nor can the monument prove that judges enforced every rule in every dispute.

Accept either passage example in question 2. For the museum label, look for a supported explanation of the code's early date and a clear distinction between written law and equal treatment.