

Code of Ur-Nammu

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The Code of Ur-Nammu is the oldest known tablet containing a law code surviving today. It was written in the Sumerian language ca. 2100-2050 BC. Although the preface directly credits the laws to king Ur-Nammu of Ur (2112-2095 BC), some historians think they should rather be ascribed to his son Shulgi.

The first copy of the code, in two fragments found at Nippur, was translated by Samuel Kramer in 1952; owing to its partial preservation, only the prologue and 5 of the laws were discernible^[1]. Further tablets were found in Ur and translated in 1965, allowing some 40 of the 57 laws to be reconstructed. Another copy found in Sippar contains slight variants.

Although it is known that earlier law-codes existed, such as the Code of Urukagina, this represents the earliest legal text that has been discovered to date. It predated the Code of Hammurabi by some three centuries.

The laws are arranged in casuistic form of if-(crime), then-(punishment) — a pattern to be followed in nearly all subsequent codes. For the oldest extant law-code known to history, it is considered remarkably advanced, because it institutes fines of monetary compensation for bodily damage, as opposed to the later *lex talionis* ('eye for an eye') principle of Babylonian law; however, the capital crimes of murder, robbery, adultery and rape are punished with death.

The code reveals a glimpse at societal structure during the "Sumerian Renaissance". Beneath the *lu-gal* ("great man" or king), all members of society belonged to one of two basic strata: The "*lu*" or free person, and the slave (male, *arad*; female *geme*). The son of a *lu* was called a *dumu-nita* until he married, becoming a "young man" (*gurus*). A woman (*munus*) went from being a daughter (*dumu-mi*), to a wife (*dam*), then if she outlived her husband, a widow (*nu-ma-su*) who could remarry.

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The prologue, typical of Mesopotamian law codes, invokes the deities for Ur-Nammu's kingship and decrees "equity in the land".

"...After An and Enlil had turned over the Kingship of Ur to Nanna, at that time did Ur-Nammu, son born of Ninsun, for his beloved mother who bore him, in accordance with his principles of equity and truth... Then did Ur-Nammu the mighty warrior, king of Ur, king of Sumer and Akkad, by the might of Nanna, lord of the city, and in accordance with the true word of Utu, establish equity in the land; he banished malediction, violence and strife, and set the monthly Temple expenses at 90 gur of barley, 30 sheep, and 30 sila of butter. He fashioned the bronze sila-measure, standardized the one-mina weight, and standardized the stone weight of a shekel of silver in relation to one mina... The orphan was not delivered up to the rich man; the widow was not delivered up to the mighty man; the man of one shekel was not delivered up to the man of one mina."

One mina was made equal to 60 shekels. Among the surviving laws are the following:

- 1. If a man commits a murder, that man must be killed.
- 2. If a man commits a robbery, he will be killed.
- 3. If a man commits a kidnapping, he is to be imprisoned and pay 15 shekels of silver.
- 4. If a slave marries a slave, and that slave is set free, he does not leave the household.
- 5. If a slave marries a native (i.e. free) person, he/she is to hand the firstborn son over to his owner.
- 6. If a man violates the right of another and deflowers the virgin wife of a young man, they shall kill that male.
- 7. If the wife of a man followed after another man and he slept with her, they shall slay that woman, but that male shall be set free. (§4 in some translations)
- 8. If a man proceeded by force, and deflowered the virgin slavewoman of another man, that man must pay five shekels of silver. (5)
- 9. If a man divorces his first-time wife, he shall pay her one mina of silver. (6)
- 10. If it is a (former) widow whom he divorces, he shall pay her half a mina of silver. (7)
- 11. If the man had slept with the widow without there having been any marriage contract, he need not pay any silver. (8)
- 13. If a man is accused of sorcery he must undergo ordeal by water; if he is proven innocent, his accuser must pay 3 shekels. (10)
- 14. If a man accused the wife of a man of adultery, and the river ordeal proved her innocent, then the man who had accused her must pay one-third of a mina of silver. (11)
- 15. If a prospective son-in-law enters the house of his prospective father-in-law,

but his father-in-law later gives his daughter to another man, the father-in-law shall return to the rejected son-in-law twofold the amount of bridal presents he had brought. (12)

- 17. If a slave escapes from the city limits, and someone returns him, the owner shall pay two shekels to the one who returned him. (14)
- 18. If a man knocks out the eye of another man, he shall weigh out $\frac{1}{2}$ a mina of silver. (15)
- 19. If a man has cut off another man's foot, he is to pay ten shekels. (16)
- 20. If a man, in the course of a scuffle, smashed the limb of another man with a club, he shall pay one mina of silver. (17)
- 21. If someone severed the nose of another man with a copper knife, he must pay two-thirds of a mina of silver. (18)
- 22. If a man knocks out a tooth of another man, he shall pay two shekels of silver. (19)
- 24. [...] If he does not have a slave, he is to pay 10 shekels of silver. If he does not have silver, he is to give another thing that belongs to him. (21)
- 25. If a man's slave-woman, comparing herself to her mistress, speaks insolently to her, her mouth shall be scoured with 1 quart of salt. (22)
- 28. If a man appeared as a witness, and was shown to be a perjurer, he must pay fifteen shekels of silver. (25)
- 29. If a man appears as a witness, but withdraws his oath, he must make payment, to the extent of the value in litigation of the case. (26)
- 30. If a man stealthily cultivates the field of another man and he raises a complaint, this is however to be rejected, and this man will lose his expenses. (27)
- 31. If a man flooded the field of a man with water, he shall measure out three *kur* of barley per *iku* of field. (28)
- 32. If a man had let an arable field to a(nother) man for cultivation, but he did not cultivate it, turning it into wasteland, he shall measure out three *kur* of barley per *iku* of field. (29)

References

1. [^] Kramer, *History begins at Sumer*, pp. 52-55.

Further reading

- Claus Wilcke. "Der Kodex Urnamma (CU): Versuch einer Rekonstruktion." *Riches hidden in secret places: ancient Near Eastern studies in memory of Thorkild Jacobson*, edited by Zvi Abusch, 2002, ISBN 1575060612
- Martha T. Roth. "Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor." *Writings from the Ancient World*, vol. 6. Society of Biblical Literature, 1995, ISBN 0788501046

See also

- Code of Hammurabi

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