

Rome's Twelve Tables

Introduction: *The Twelve Tables stood at the foundation of Roman law. The Tables consolidated earlier traditions into an enduring set of laws and were written about 450 BCE after the expulsion of the last king of Rome and a long social struggle between patricians and plebeians. Displayed in the Forum, The Twelve Tables stated the rights and duties of the Roman citizen. The following laws have been excerpted and reworded from the original Twelve Tables of Ancient Rome.*

- If you are called to go to court, you must go. If you don't show up, you can be taken to court by force.
- If you need a witness to testify and he will not show up, you can go once every three days and shout in front of his house.
- Females shall remain in guardianship even when they have attained their majority.
- Should a tree on a neighbor's farm bend, crooked by the wind and lean over your farm, you may take legal action for removal of that tree.
- If it's your tree, it's your fruit, even if it falls on another man's land.
- If anyone sings or composes an incantation [a magic spell] that can cause dishonor or disgrace to another ... he shall suffer a capital penalty.
- A person who had been found guilty of giving false witness shall be hurled down from the Tarpeian Rock.
- No person shall hold meetings by night in the city.
- A dead man shall not be buried or burned within the city.
- Marriages should not take place between plebeians and patricians.*

*As time went on, this law was changed. When the tables were first written, this was the law.

Hammurabi's Code

Introduction: *The Babylonian King Hammurabi is best known for his code of laws, which were written between 1792 to 1750 BCE. Hammurabi used the code of laws to unify his empire in Mesopotamia and to preserve order. He based the laws not just on his own authority, but on the word of the gods. He claimed that the gods had told him to create the laws that applied to everyone in the empire. Because they were based on the gods' will, the laws could not be changed. The following laws have been excerpted and reworded from the original.*

22. If any one is committing a robbery and is caught, then he shall be put to death.

23. If the robber is not caught, then shall he who was robbed claim under oath the amount of his loss; then shall the community, and . . . on whose ground and territory and in whose domain it was compensate him for the goods stolen.

117. If a man be in debt and is unable to pay his creditors, he shall sell his wife, son, or daughter, or bind them over to service. For three years they shall work in the houses of their purchaser or master; in the fourth year they shall be given their freedom.

143. If a wife has been... neglecting her house and belittling her husband, they shall throw that woman into the water.

195. If a son has struck his father, they shall cut off his hand.

196. If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out. [An eye for an eye]

198. If he destroyed the eye of a peasant, or broken a bone of a peasant, he shall pay one mina of silver.

199. If he destroyed the eye of a man's slave, or broken a bone of a man's slave, he shall pay half his value.

229. If a builder builds a house for a man and does not make its construction sound, and the house which he has built collapses and causes the death of the owner of the house, the builder shall be put to death.