

# King Hammurabi of Babylon

*A Biography*

Marc Van De Mieroop

 **Blackwell**  
Publishing



# King Hammurabi of Babylon

## **Blackwell Ancient Lives**

At a time when much scholarly writing on the ancient world is abstract and analytical, this series presents engaging, accessible accounts of the most influential figures of antiquity. It re-peoples the ancient landscape; and while never losing sight of the vast gulf that separates antiquity from our own world, it seeks to communicate the delight of reading historical narratives to discover "what happened next."

### **Published**

King Hammurabi of Babylon  
*Marc Van De Mieroop*

### **In Preparation**

Cleopatra  
*Sally Ann-Ashton*

Constantine the Great  
*Timothy Barnes*

Pericles  
*Charles Hamilton*

Julius Caesar  
*W. Jeffrey Tatum*

Alexander the Great in His World  
*Carol Thomas*

# King Hammurabi of Babylon

*A Biography*

Marc Van De Mieroop

 **Blackwell**  
Publishing

© 2005 by Marc Van De Mieroop

BLACKWELL PUBLISHING

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK

550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

The right of Marc Van De Mieroop to be identified as the Author of this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

First published 2005 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

3 2007

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Van De Mieroop, Marc.

King Hammurabi of Babylon : a biography / Marc Van De Mieroop.

p. cm. — (Blackwell ancient lives)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-2659-5 (hb. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-4051-2660-1 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Hammurabi, King of Babylonia. 2. Babylonia—History. 3. Babylonia—Kings and rulers—Biography. I. Title. II. Series.

DS73.35.V36 2004

935'.02'092—dc22

2004013272

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/13pt Trump Mediaeval  
by Graphicraft Ltd, Hong Kong  
Printed and bound in Singapore  
by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

For further information on  
Blackwell Publishing, visit our website:  
[www.blackwellpublishing.com](http://www.blackwellpublishing.com)

# Contents

---

List of Illustrations	vi
Preface	vii
Map	ix
Chronology	x
Abbreviations	xi
1 The Early Years	1
2 The Defeat of Elam	15
3 The Annexation of Larsa	31
4 The Overthrow of Eshnunna	40
5 Supremacy in the North	54
6 The Sack of Mari	64
7 Governing the New State	79
8 Hammurabi, the Lawgiver	99
9 Hammurabi's Character	112
10 Hammurabi's Legacy	122
11 On Writing Hammurabi's Biography	135
Glossary	146
Notes	153
Bibliography	160
Guide to Further Reading	164
Index	166

# Illustrations

---

1.1	Victory stela probably commissioned for King Shamshi-Adad	9
3.1	Terracotta plaque from Larsa	37
4.1	Statue of an unknown ruler of Eshnunna	42
5.1	A reconstruction of the temple at Qattara	62
6.1	Aerial view of the palace at Mari	66
7.1	Letter written by Hammurabi to two men in Larsa	97
8.1	The stela of Hammurabi	100
9.1	Head of an aged man, possibly Hammurabi	120
10.1	Fragment of a statue inscribed with a hymn in praise of Hammurabi	125
11.1	Statuette of a kneeling figure, excavated at Larsa	138



# Preface

---

Hammurabi is one of the few names from Ancient Mesopotamia that is recognized by many people today, although the man lived thirty-eight centuries ago. His renowned law code, carved on a two-and-a-quarter-meter-high stone stela on exhibit in the Louvre Museum in Paris, has guaranteed that fame and defines it. King Hammurabi is celebrated as a law-giver, whose code is the best known and most eloquent testimony of the legal thoughts of the people of the ancient Middle East. His close to 300 laws prescribe what to do in cases of theft, murder, professional negligence, and many other areas in the daily lives of the people whom he ruled. They are often regarded as the earliest expression of ideas of justice, which are still with us today. Hammurabi deserves to be remembered for the fact that he carved laws on stone, but there are many other aspects to this king's achievements: he was a ruler, warrior, diplomat, and administrator. Those facets are also revealed to us in testimonies of his own time, not on stone stelae but on numerous clay tablets excavated in modern-day Iraq and eastern Syria, and are less known to the general public. They do, however, show a fascinating and multifaceted man, one not always as benign as he wanted to be remembered.

The center of Hammurabi's world was greater Babylonia, the south of today's Iraq from Baghdad to the Persian Gulf. He was in direct contact with more distant regions, from south-western Iran to north-western Syria. He knew of kingdoms

and rulers farther afield. Throughout the whole Middle East, from Iran to the Mediterranean coast and from Anatolia to Egypt, existed scores of small states ruled by local dynasties. Some were more powerful than others; some conquered their neighbors and created larger kingdoms, but those lasted not for very long. Even Egypt, a country that had for centuries been politically unified, was at the time fragmented under competing royal houses. For a short while Hammurabi would change the political layout of his world, since he established through conquest a state that stretched for some 400 kilometers along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers inland from the Persian Gulf. While this creation was ephemeral, it was part of a general evolution throughout the Middle East that would change a system of city-states to one of territorial states.

Hammurabi accomplished all this in the last third of a long reign, which lasted from 1792 to 1750 BC. He was thus not just a man of peace, who provided justice to his people, but also one of war, who initiated fundamental changes in the ancient history of the Middle East with his conquests. We can study these multiple aspects through an extensive documentation from his time that includes his diplomatic correspondence and that of his contemporaries. This material shows him to be a crucial figure in world history, and possibly the earliest one for whom we can write a detailed biography.

In the writing of this book I have benefited much from the assistance of Seth Richardson during his time as a post-doctoral fellow at Columbia University. His appointment was made possible by a generous grant from the Joseph Rosen Foundation. Various colleagues kindly provided some of the illustrations and the permissions to use them: Lamia al-Gailani Weir and Donny George (Iraq Museum), Ulla Kasten (Yale Babylonian Collection), and Jean-Claude Margueron (Mission archéologique de Mari). Stephanie Dalley gave me the permission to reproduce a drawing from her book *Mari and Karana*. I am extremely grateful to all these people and organizations.

*Marc Van De Mieroop*



The Middle East in the time of Hammurabi

# A Note on Chronology

---

The dates of the beginning and the end of Hammurabi's reign used in this book are 1792 to 1750 BC. This sounds much more certain than it is in reality. The chronology of early Mesopotamian history and how it relates to the Common Era is not fully clear, and scholars have suggested different systems that place the reign of Hammurabi about 70 years earlier or later. The chronology suggested here is the most commonly found in scholarship, however.

The Babylonian year did not coincide with the modern one, but started some time in March–April. Moreover, it was based on a lunar calendar that is about six days shorter than the length of a year today. Most Babylonian years were 12 months of 30 days each long, but some had 13 months to make up for the difference in length between lunar and solar years. When scholars assign absolute dates BC to a year in the reign of a king (e.g., Hammurabi's first year is 1792 BC), they seem to suggest that the last month of that year was the equivalent to our month December. That is not the case, and most likely would have coincided with March of 1791 BC. In order not to complicate descriptions, I will make use of statements such as "at the end of 1792," with the intent to indicate the end of the Babylonian year.

# Abbreviations

---

Most of the letters quoted in this book are published in two series of volumes that provide editions and translations in French, German, or English. The references will be made to these series.

Letters from Mari are primarily published in the French series *Archives royales de Mari*, abbreviated as ARM.

ARM I = Dossin, G. 1950. *Correspondance de Šamši-Addu et ses fils*. Paris: Imprimerie nationale.

ARM II = Jean, Ch.-F. 1950. *Lettres diverses*. Paris: Imprimerie nationale.

ARM IV = Dossin, G. 1951. *Correspondance de Šamši-Addu et ses fils (suite)*. Paris: Imprimerie nationale.

ARM V = Dossin, G. 1952. *Correspondance de Iasmaḥ-Addu*. Paris: Imprimerie nationale.

ARM VI = Kupper, J. R. 1954. *Correspondance de Baḥdi-Lim*. Paris: Imprimerie nationale.

ARM XIII = Dossin, G. et al. 1964. *Textes divers*. Paris: Librarie orientaliste Paul Geuthner.

ARM XIV = Birot, M. 1974. *Lettres de Yaqqim-Addu gouverneur de Sagarâtum*. Paris: Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner.

ARM XXV = Limet, H. 1986. *Textes administratifs relatifs aux métaux*. Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations.

ARM XXVI/1 = Durand, J.-M. 1988. *Archives épistolaires de Mari I/1*. Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations.

ARM XXVI/2 = Charpin, D. et al. 1988. *Archives épistolaires de Mari I/2*. Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations.

ARM XXVII = Birot, M. 1993. *Correspondance des gouverneurs de Qaṭṭunân*. Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations.

Babylonian letters are mostly quoted from the series *Altbabylonische Briefe in Umschrift und Übersetzung*, abbreviated as AbB.

AbB 2 = Frankena, R. 1966. *Briefe aus dem British Museum*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

AbB 4 = Kraus, F. R. 1968. *Briefe aus dem Archive des Šamaš-ḫāzir*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

AbB 9 = Stol, M. 1981. *Letters from Yale*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

AbB 10 = Kraus, F. R. 1985. *Briefe aus kleineren westeuropäischen Sammlungen*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

AbB 13 = Van Soldt, W. H. 1994. *Letters in the British Museum Part 2*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Passages from the code of Hammurabi are cited following the recent edition by Roth in 1997. The abbreviation used for it here is CH.

# 1

## The Early Years

---

Hammurabi became king of Babylon in 1792 BC. He must have been relatively young at the time as he was to remain on the throne for forty-three years, but whether he was in his teens, twenties, or thirties, we do not know. People had a lower life expectancy then than they do today, yet several men of the period are known to have lived into their seventies, and conceivably Hammurabi was among them. His mother's name is unknown. His father was his predecessor on the throne, one Sin-muballit, who himself had ruled for twenty years. They both belonged to a dynasty of independent kings of the city of Babylon and its surroundings that had started to rule around 1900 and would continue to do so until around 1600. These kings are now referred to as the First Dynasty of Babylon, of which Hammurabi was the most illustrious member.

Politically Babylon up until then had been one of the numerous city-states – small territories governed from an urban center – that covered the area of Mesopotamia. Some had very ancient origins going back to before 3,000 BC, others were more recent, and Babylon itself was only some 400 years old by the time Hammurabi ascended the throne. In the first centuries of the second millennium, city-states were scattered from the Persian Gulf to the mountains of southern Turkey, from the west of modern-day Iran to the Mediterranean coast. Most had their palace, the residence of the king and his staff. All had at least one temple, the house of the patron deity of

the city at the center of the state. All had an army, whose size depended on the number of inhabitants and the wealth of the state. Because these states were often close together and needed agricultural fields to feed their populations, conflict was a regular part of their interactions. From our point of view, four millennia later and filtered through the lens of the ancient sources, it may even seem that they were constantly at war with one another. At times, one city was militarily successful enough that it conquered wide territories and ruled supreme for a while – a few decades or a century – but when the central powers waned, the independent dynasties of the subordinate city-states would re-emerge. The city-state ideal was on its way out, however, and a consolidation of territorial control became more common, albeit slowly. Three hundred years before Hammurabi, the city of Ur in the very south of Mesopotamia had united the whole of the region from modern-day Baghdad to the Persian Gulf (the area later called Babylonia), including the city of Babylon. When this union disintegrated, several of the local thrones were seized by men whose background was not in the cities themselves, but among nomadic herdsmen. They spoke a different language from the townspeople, Amorite rather than Akkadian, and had their own cultural traditions and gods. But when they became rulers of the cities, they accepted the ancient urban customs, writing in Akkadian and adopting the practices of the urban rulers in the cult and government. They acknowledged their dual backgrounds, however: they were at once urban kings and tribal sheikhs (the English translations are anachronistic, based on later Middle Eastern terminology, but the distinction is approximately the same).

Hammurabi also had an Amorite ancestry. That was already visible in his name, which, as all names of ancient Mesopotamia, made up a short sentence. Many names used one language only. For example, that of Hammurabi's father, Sin-muballit was fully Akkadian and meant, "The god Sin is the giver of life." The name Hammurabi combined the Amorite word for "family" (*hammu*) with the Akkadian adjective



“great” (*rabi*). (Some scholars read it all as Amorite, ‘Ammurapi, meaning, “the kinsman heals”). Similarly, his titles also referred to both constituencies: he often employed the common royal title “King of Babylon,” referring to his urban role, but sometimes he was “father” or “king of the Amorite land,” a tribal affiliation.

Hammurabi’s family was far from unique at the time and the mixture of cultural traditions was characteristic throughout the Middle East. In southern Mesopotamia, the ancient Babylonian heritage predominated: a mixture of Sumerian and Akkadian, with Amorite elements. In northern Mesopotamia there were Amorite and Hurrian traditions. In south-west Iran, the local Elamite culture had been strongly influenced by Babylonia, and in western Syria local cultures, Amorite and others, had also accepted Babylonian practices. All over the Middle East the literate culture was Babylonian. The people who wrote, a small minority of the population indeed, did so in that language, using the cuneiform script and the clay tablet developed in southern Mesopotamia in the late fourth millennium. They spoke a variety of languages – Akkadian, Amorite, Elamite, Hurrian, Sumerian, and probably others – but they all wrote in Babylonian when contacting one another.

When Hammurabi succeeded his father, the kingdom of Babylon was some 60 by 160 kilometers in size. His predecessors had expanded it from a small territory around the city of Babylon by integrating some of the neighboring city-states, such as Borsippa, Kish, and Sippar, which remained important cities in the state. They controlled the very northern part of Babylonia, at the spot where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers came the closest together. At Hammurabi’s accession, his kingdom was just one among many in the Middle East, and it was hardly the most important. The geopolitical situation was complex and had seen some drastic changes in the preceding decades. Just at the time that Hammurabi became king, King Rim-Sin of Larsa unified the south and center of Babylonia, from the Persian Gulf to the southern border of Babylon. He had accomplished this through the conquest of all his

neighbors, culminating in the annexation of Isin, which had dominated central Babylonia since the fall of Ur. Hammurabi thus faced a formidable opponent in the south: Rim-Sin, who must have remembered that Hammurabi's father, Sin-muballit, had joined a coalition with Isin and Uruk against him in 1810, and had skirmishes with him later on.

Hammurabi's neighbor in the north-east was also strong. Across the Tigris along the Diyala river was the state of Eshnunna, whose kings had consolidated power from the Zagros mountains down to the river plain, and had successfully campaigned in areas even further north. They seem to have left Babylon alone, but did assert their rights over the cities that controlled the crossing of the Tigris. For example, several sites now underneath modern Baghdad were firmly held by Eshnunna.

East of the Tigris, some 300 kilometers to the south of Eshnunna, was the powerful state of Elam, whose western capital, Susa, had a venerable history going back to the fourth millennium. Elam was somewhat isolated from the lands between the Tigris and Euphrates as the only route between them ran northward along the foothills of the Zagros and had to pass through the kingdom of Eshnunna. Elam was strong and rich, however, and it seems to have been respected and feared by all. The ruler could intervene in local Babylonian matters, impose his wishes and adjudicate disagreements. In Hammurabi's early years, the ruler of Elam does not seem to have shown any interest in directly annexing parts of the Mesopotamian lands, however, and remained at a distance.

The regional superpower of the time, actively involved in Mesopotamian affairs, was the kingdom of Upper Mesopotamia, far to the north of Babylon. It was the creation of a king called Shamshi-Adad, and his personal history was fully intertwined with that of his kingdom. Shamshi-Adad's origins and early reign are obscure. Like Hammurabi, he was the descendant of Amorites who had seized power in an urban center, but we do not know exactly where they first did so. Shamshi-Adad's father was already an urban ruler, based in an unknown

city located possibly between Babylon and Eshnunna, and we know he conducted military campaigns against his neighbors. When Shamshi-Adad succeeded his father, at an unknown date in the late nineteenth century, he took advantage of a temporary weakness of Eshnunna to occupy large parts of northern Mesopotamia. The chronology of events is uncertain, but some details are clear. In 1811, Shamshi-Adad seized Ekallatum, a city on the Tigris. Three years later he captured nearby Assur, one of the oldest cities of northern Mesopotamia, which had a central role in the long-distance trade between Babylonia, Iran, and Anatolia. In 1808, Shamshi-Adad took the throne at Assur and, in order to legitimize his rule, he worked his name and that of his ancestors into the official local king list. Later versions of that document state that he ruled for another thirty-three years.

To the west of the Tigris valley lay the wide and fertile plains of northern Iraq and Syria, as well as the routes to Anatolia and the Mediterranean sea. An expansion in that direction thus had great economic benefits. Although the details are vague, Shamshi-Adad seems to have gradually occupied the existing small kingdoms there, taking some over outright and leaving others under the rule of native kings who became his vassals. His strongest opponent in the west was the kingdom of Mari under Yahdun-Lim, who controlled the Middle Euphrates valley and the southern Habur. The two fought one another over the regions north of Mari and at first Yahdun-Lim was more successful. But his own son, Sumu-Yaman, assassinated him around 1794 and seized the throne of the Mari kingdom. He did not enjoy power for long, however; three years later, in 1796, Shamshi-Adad captured Mari and incorporated its territories into his state.

The kingdom that Shamshi-Adad created, which we call the Kingdom of Upper Mesopotamia, was enormous in size for its time. It stretched over some 400 kilometers from the Tigris to the Euphrates along northern Mesopotamia, and from the border of Babylonia to the Turkish mountains for about the same distance. It was much less densely inhabited than