

# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN MESOPOTAMIA

The best known and most complete of the ancient pre-Roman law codes is the Code of Hammurabi, XVIII century BC ruler of Babylon. Some of the main principles of this code were:

- Social order was more important than individual rights
- Women's sexuality should be sacrificed to ensure legitimacy
- A family's wealth should be administered by the husband/father
- Women, especially widows and divorcees, needed society's help

Through the Hammurabi's code we can extract some information about the situation of the women in the Ancient Mesopotamia.



The Mesopotamian woman's role was strictly defined. She was the daughter of her father or the wife of her husband. Women rarely acted as individuals outside the context of their families. Those who did so were usually royalty or the wives of men who had power and status.

Most girls were trained from childhood for the traditional roles of wife, mother, and housekeeper. They learned how to grind grain, how to cook and make beverages, especially beer, and how to spin and weave cloth for clothing. If a woman worked outside of her home, her job usually grew out of her household tasks. She might sell the beer she brewed, or even become a tavern keeper.

Soon after puberty, a young girl was considered ready for marriage. Marriages were arranged by the families of the future bride and groom. Ceremonies have been described where the future husband poured perfume on the head of

the bride. He also gave her family money and other presents. Once a woman was engaged, she was considered part of her fiancé's family. If her husband-to-be died before the wedding, she was then married to one of his brothers or another male relative.

In the marriage contract there were two very important concepts: the dowry, and the bride's price. The dowry was the quantity the father gave to her daughter for her new home. The bride's price was the quantity the family had to pay, so the son could marry a woman.

At marriage a woman's sexuality became the property of her husband. Adultery was defined in Babylonia as a sexual relationship between a married woman and a man not her husband. The marital status of the man was irrelevant.

A man could divorce his wife without giving a reason, but if she had borne him children there were some serious conditions: she kept the children; she got the dowry; she also got the use of a field or property so she could raise her children.



1. Why can we say that the Code of Hammurabi reflects a social situation of discrimination against women?
2. What was the dowry and bride price?
3. How was marriage established?

#### Bibliography

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