The Stele of Hammurabi is a stunning eight-foot-tall basalt artifact that illustrates the power of Babylonian law. Located in the renowned Louvre museum in Paris, France, and dated to around 1780 B.C., this stele is so visually stunning that it fittingly holds the words of the divinely chosen King Hammurabi of Babylon. Not only does it provide a comprehensive law code dealing with civic and criminal violations, but it is also one of the earliest renditions of political and religious propaganda, showing the omnipotent and omnipresent power of visual depictions. As a result, the Stele of Hammurabi is a testament to the sophisticated society of Babylon.

At the top of the looming eight-foot-tall stele resides a low relief sculpture designed as a form of propaganda. In it Shamash, the god of justice, sits upon a throne with his back rigidly straight, his robe falling in neat folds, and his feet resting upon a footstool, a symbol of the heavens. Yet the standing figure of King Hammurabi is barely the same height as the sitting Shamash, who resonates his sheer dominance. Hammurabi’s robes even
seem more askew when compared to Shamash’s, perhaps hinting at human imperfection. However, the sun god does not shun the miniscule human king, but instead seems to counsel him; the king’s left arm is raised to his chin as if stroking it in silent contemplation of the god’s words. At the same time, Shamash offers Hammurabi a rod with his right hand and ring with his left, symbols of Shamash’s favor and the King’s royal right to rule, respectively. As such, the stele emanates to the viewer the divine will of Shamash in appointing Hammurabi as his vassal on earth, stressing the complexity of Babylonian religion.

Below the low relief carving are sixteen columns of archaic cuneiform that promulgate laws of order, stability, and continuity throughout Hammurabi’s domain. Although the writing on the stele may simply seem to be intended to instruct citizens in the ways of the laws, the fact that its archaic cuneiform is highly stylistic and outdated means that even the literate may have had trouble reading it.¹ As such, this may point to the fact that it was designed to be more of a visual form of propaganda than an indication of the rule of law. The indecipherable quality of the cuneiform, especially to the illiterate, would give the stele

an almost mystic quality; this quality may have made it seem like the incomprehensible will of the gods. Furthermore, scholars seem to believe that judges during this time period did not use the *Code of Hammurabi* for their legal decisions, but instead relied on their own sense of judgment. This seems to suggest that the stele was primarily made as a form of propaganda and not as an actual code of law. Perhaps it was designed for rare, isolated cases that had no judicial precedent already set.\(^2\) Either way, the stele shows a sophisticated form of propaganda and alludes to the rule of law.

The stele also devotes much of its limited space not to law, but to the praise of Hammurabi. In the first four and a half columns of archaic script, otherwise known as the prologue, the stele talks of Hammurabi’s divine appointment and duties. It declares, “the lofty Anu, king of the Anunaki gods, and Enlil lord of heaven and earth...named me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince...to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the

weak.”\textsuperscript{3} The prologue then continues to elaborate how Hammurabi provided for the welfare of his people, rebuilt religious sanctuaries, and brought the four corners of the earth order and unity. The epilogue, which is contained in the last five columns of the stele, continues praising Hammurabi for his wisdom, which will earn his people the favor of the gods. As such, the prologue and epilogue seem to suggest that the stele is not just a promulgation of the king’s law, but a marker meant to raise religious and political support for the king.

Furthermore, the stele provides 282 comprehensive laws on topics such as murder and wage regulations, highlighting an intricate society. Perhaps one of the most insightful sets of laws that Hammurabi proclaims are those dealing with trade regulations and loans. When dealing with loans and interest, if merchants lent grain they could charge 33.5 percent interest, and if they lent silver they could charge 20 percent interest. Hammurabi also provides laws for fair trade, within which merchants were obligated to provide receipts to the purchasers. However, if they were suspected of cheating their buyers or the buyers of cheating them, they were liable to investigation. These laws

\textsuperscript{3} Nels M. Baikley and Richard Lim, \textit{Readings in Ancient History}, 7\textsuperscript{th} ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 1996), 27-34.
exemplify the complex nature of Babylonian society. However, many of these laws could also seem brutal and unfair. For example, if a male citizen had a debt he could not pay, he was allowed to sell his children and wife into slavery for a period of three years.\textsuperscript{4} Even with such harshness, these laws still illustrate a society with extensive commerce.

\textit{The Code of Hammurabi} also protects the right to property. Individuals who believed that they had been robbed were allowed to bring accusations against the robber, resulting in a trial. If these accusations proved true, the robber was sentenced to death, but if they proved false the accuser was sentenced to death.\textsuperscript{5} These harsh property laws illustrate the severity of Babylon, but also support the idea of its complex commercial economy.

A few of the more interesting laws on the stele are those dealing with wine sales. These laws seem to imply that only priestesses belonging to convents were allowed to sell wine. However, these laws also deprived the priestess of the right to accept money; instead, they needed to accept grain as payment or face the penalty of death. The priestesses were also held responsible for the conduct of the

\textsuperscript{4} Baikley and Lim (1996) 27-34.
\textsuperscript{5} Baikley and Lim (1996) 28-29.
people around their wine shops. As a result, if a priestess did not report intoxicated buyers to authorities, she was sentenced to death.\(^6\) Perhaps the economic deprivation and strict punishment of priestesses relate to the level of respect and influence they received from the people; this influence could have lead Hammurabi to fear their power, thereby leading him to limit it through harsh regulations. If so, this situation shows a tense relationship between the religious class and state in Babylon.

The Stele of Hammurabi is evidence of the rule of law, proof of a thriving international economy, and a restriction on the power of the religious class. This artifact from the ancient world continues to enthral modern viewers with its early emphasis on law and order. For societies throughout the world dependent on the rule of law, the stele recalls the success of one of the earliest quests for stability in social organization. As such, the Stele of Hammurabi remains an important indication of both ancient Babylonian law and the general ideal of law still familiar to so many today.

