once again several thousand of its citizens were deported to Babylon.

After Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon's glorious history declined. The last king, Nabonidus (ruled 556–539 B.C.), was a mysterious figure—an elderly scholar who seemed to be more interested in religion than in solving Babylonia's problems. Around 550 B.C., without warning, Nabonidus went to live in Teiman, an oasis in the Arabian desert. He stayed there for 10 years, leaving his oldest son, Belshazzar, in charge of Babylon. In 539 B.C. the Persians invaded Babylon, and both Nabonidus and Belshazzar were killed. Babylonia was taken over and became a province of the Persian Empire.

BABYLONIAN SOCIETY
Babylonian society was made up of three distinct groups—aristocrats, free citizens (commoners), and slaves. The aristocrats were generally government officials, military leaders, priests, wealthy landowners, and rich merchants. The commoners—or free citizens—were the craftsmen, traders, farmers, and scribes. Slaves were at the bottom, but some slaves could own land and even buy their own freedom. Women, too, could own land, but they were not educated. Only boys were allowed to go to school.

FARMING
Most people in Babylonia worked as farmers. The flat plain between the Tigris and Euphrates was very fertile, since each spring the rivers flooded, spreading rich silt over the low-lying land. A network of man-made channels carried water from the rivers to irrigate the fields. Farmers grew crops such as barley and sesame, vegetables, and fruits. They also kept bees for honey, and grew flowers such as lotuses and lilies to make perfume. Herds of goats,
In Babylon, the law was literally set in stone—carved in stone tablets. The most famous set of laws was King Hammurabi’s code, which was written down around 1760 B.C. The code contained 282 articles. Its purpose was “to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong may not oppress the weak.”

The law was not the same for everyone, however. The same crime carried different penalties according to who had committed it and whom it was committed against. For example, if one aristocrat harmed another, the rule was “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth”—in other words, the criminal would suffer the same injury that he had caused his victim. However, if an aristocrat hurt a commoner or slave, his penalty was lighter, and he only had to pay a fine.

Punishments in Babylonian law included fines, beatings, mutilation, and execution. Imprisonment and forced labor did not exist. If a surgeon killed a patient during a major operation, he could have his hand cut off. Architects whose buildings collapsed and caused the death of the house-owner could be executed.

There were also laws for the family. Men could divorce their wives and were allowed to have mistresses. They were allowed to sell their wives and children into slavery. Wives, however, could only divorce their husbands if they could show they had been abused or treated cruelly. They risked death if they could not prove their case. A son who hit his father could have his hand cut off.

The law code of King Hammurabi was carved on this stone column in cuneiform writing. Shamash, the god of justice, is shown seated on top of the column, handing the laws to King Hammurabi (standing).
sheep, and cattle grazed the rich pastures. Much of the land was owned by the king, or by priests and noblemen, so many farmers leased the plots of ground they worked.

Many city-dwellers were either merchants or craftsmen. Merchants traveled far away, exchanging textiles, grain, and manufactured goods for wood, stone, and precious metals. There were not many building materials in Babylon, so wood and stone were very valuable. Craftsmen grouped together to form professional clubs called guilds. Boys would learn a trade from a master craftsman.

**SCIENCE AND MATH**

The Babylonians were accomplished scientists and mathematicians. They invented the lunar calendar, which divided the year into 12 months based on the phases of the moon. Months were divided into weeks of seven days, and each day was divided into 24 hours. Like the Sumerians, they divided the hour into 60 minutes.

In mathematics they excelled at geometry and algebra, and understood square roots and fractions. They were skilled doctors and left detailed medical records of the symptoms of many illnesses and their cures. They had a good knowledge of anatomy and understood the circulation of the blood in the human body.

The Babylonians spoke Akkadian, a Semitic language. They wrote in cuneiform script, a system of writing developed by the Sumerians. Several thousands of documents written on clay tablets have been discovered. Many are business records, listing legal contracts, receipts, and loans. Others record military victories, mathematical proofs, prayers, or works of fiction.

**SEE ALSO:**
- **AKKADIAN EMPIRE**
- **ASSYRIANS**
- **BABYLON**
- **CALENDARS AND CLOCKS**
- **MESOPOTAMIA**
- **SUMERIANS**

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△ A beautiful Babylonian necklace of gold and lapis lazuli (a blue mineral), with a sculpted female head as a pendant.