

HUMAN RIGHTS' HISTORY



In the Western world, the history of human rights can be traced from the little known legal codes of Near Eastern antiquity through to the slightly better known international human rights instruments we have today like the [Geneva Conventions](#) and the [Universal Declaration on Human Rights](#).

Although there are references to even older codes, the oldest legal codex still in existence today is the [Neo-Sumerian Code of Ur-Nammu](#) (ca. 2050 BC).

Much of that code would nowadays be considered a repressive denial of many of the rights we claim, like the right to freedom from slavery. But it shows that human rights are not new, and even 4,066 years ago people were concerned about [basic human rights](#) like the right to life and dignity, to not be arbitrarily deprived of property, and to enjoy equality with one's peers before the law.

Following the Code of Ur-Nammu, the [Mesopotamian Empire](#) issued the [Code of Hammurabi](#) (ca. 1780 BC), which set out the rules, and punishments if those rules were broken, on a wider variety of human rights, including [women's rights](#), [men's rights](#), [children's rights](#) and [slaves' rights](#).

Importantly, both the Code of Ur-Nammu and the Code of Hammurabi arranged their laws in [casuistic](#) form of IF (crime) THEN (punishment), a pattern followed in nearly all later codes, including those written and used by the Greek and Roman Empires.

It was also followed by the [Achaemenid Persian Empire](#) of [ancient Iran](#) which established unprecedented principles of human rights in the 6th century BC under [Cyrus the Great](#). Those principles were later witnessed to by the writers of the [Books of Chronicles](#), [Nehemiah](#), and [Ezra](#) in what we now know as the Holy Bible.

They were also followed and supported by the [Constitution of Medina](#) that [Muhammad](#) drafted in 622 AD which led to Islamic social reforms in areas such as [social security](#), [family](#) structure, [slavery](#), and the rights of [women](#) and [ethnic minorities](#).

After the fall of Rome came the Dark Ages when human rights existed mainly in the negative. I.e. they were ruthlessly denied during centuries of unprecedented migration and loss of trade plus huge drops in cultural and literary output as whole populations fled from one dreadful regime to another.

The end of the Dark Ages correlates with the issuance by the English in 1215 of the [Magna Carta](#), and that document's most enduring legacies are the right of [habeas corpus](#) and the right to [due process](#). It also influenced the development of the [common law](#) and many later constitutional documents, like the [United States Constitution](#) and the New Zealand [Bill of Rights Act](#).

As this very brief column shows, the desire for human rights is in-born and has driven most every human endeavour since the beginning of recorded time.

And yet I wonder, how likely is it that even this once-over lightly treatment is more exposure than the majority of its readers have had in their entire lives to their human rights' history?

