

## HOW MANY PEOPLE LIVED IN TENOCHTITLAN?

Ancient cities leave behind physical traces of their architecture and extent, but unless reliable censuses also remain, population size is a rough estimate. Archaeologists commonly use the community's known area, multiplied by population density values from cultures with similar architectural styles and household size.

In modern descriptions of the Aztecs, Tenochtitlan's population size is often estimated to number in the hundreds of thousands, some scholars even suggesting that the population of the city proper might have been at least as large as half a million. This estimate (Vaillant 1966: 134) was derived from several 16th-century descriptions, but these are not always accurate.

What is a reasonable estimate of Tenochtitlan's population size? The area of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco is known to be about 5.4 square miles (nearly 14 square kilometers). Aztec buildings were single-story

constructions: most had several levels, created by establishing solid platforms upon which the higher-level rooms were built around lower-level patios. However, there are no known examples of buildings with two (or more) stories of enclosed constructed rooms.

And yet a population estimate of 500,000 people living in 5.4 square miles would have a density of close to 96,000 persons per square mile. Modern Manhattan has fewer than 67,000, and lower-density modern cities, with some skyscrapers and extensive residential neighborhoods, have much lower values. San Francisco has just over 14,000 persons per square mile; Los Angeles has roughly 7,000 people per square mile.

Applying these values to Tenochtitlan, we might be looking at a population of between 35,000 and 75,000. These estimates, too, leave much to be

desired. A solid analysis of Tenochtitlan's density would require careful use of available maps (reconstructions from archaeological sources and ethnohistoric documents such as the *Mapa de México* [1550]) plus estimates of Aztec family and household sizes. For now, a population of 50,000 for the city proper seems reasonable, if perhaps a bit inflated. There might have been 100,000 people if nearby cities and towns on the mainland are included.



20.7 *Modern Manhattan is less densely settled than Tenochtitlan, according to some population estimates of the Aztec capital.*