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Tenochtitlan

The Aztec Capital Beneath Mexico City

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Name: Period: Date:

Tenochtitlan: The Aztec Capital Beneath Mexico City

An Island City Unlike Any Other

When Spanish soldiers first laid eyes on Tenochtitlan in November 1519, they were stunned into silence. Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a soldier who later wrote a memoir of the conquest, described it as seeming like the enchantments told of in the book of Amadis — a legendary romance novel — because of the great towers, temples, and buildings rising from the water. The city occupied an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco, connected to the mainland by three massive causeways wide enough for ten horses to ride abreast. Freshwater was carried in by a double-pipe aqueduct from springs on the mainland. At its peak, Tenochtitlan had a population of at least 200,000 — perhaps as many as 300,000 — making it one of the largest cities in the world in 1500 CE. The Spanish who conquered it in 1521 then did something unprecedented in the history

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The 1978 Discovery and What Followed

On February 21, 1978, workers from the Compania de Luz electric company were digging a trench near the Mexico City Cathedral when they hit a massive stone disc about three meters below the street. The disc measured 3.25 meters across and weighed approximately eight tons. As archaeologists were called in and the carving cleaned, it became clear that this was a representation of Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess of Aztec mythology, depicted dismembered after being killed by the sun god Huitzilopochtli. The stone had lain at the base of the Templo Mayor, the great

double pyramid that was the religious heart of Tenochtitlan. The discovery triggered one of the most significant urban archaeological projects of the twentieth century. The Mexican government, under President Jose Lopez Portillo, authorized the demolition of several city blocks of colonial buildings to expose the Templo Mayor. Excavations led by archaeologist Eduardo Matos Moctezuma began in 1978 and have continued in various phases ever since. What they found was extraordinary: not one pyramid but seven successive pyramids, each built over its predecessor as each new ruler expanded the monument. The successive layers span from approximately 1325 CE (the legendary founding of Tenochtitlan) to 1520 CE, just before the Spanish conquest.

What the Templo Mayor Contains

The Templo Mayor was dedicated to two gods: Huitzilopochtli (god of the sun and warfare) on one side, and Tlaloc (god of rain and agriculture) on the other. This dual dedication reflected the two pillars of Aztec power: military conquest and agricultural productivity. Archaeologists have discovered more than 200 offering caches buried within the pyramid structure, containing an astonishing variety of objects: coral, seashells, and crocodile bones from the Gulf Coast; jaguar remains; obsidian blades; pottery; and human skulls showing evidence of ritual processing. The offerings reveal an extensive trade and tribute network stretching across Mesoamerica. One of the most dramatic finds came from excavations in the early 2000s: the remains of numerous individuals, many showing evidence of ritual sacrifice, including skulls with cut marks, bones dyed red with hematite, and skeletal material arranged in deliberate patterns. In 2015, archaeologists discovered a large circular stone platform (a tzompantli, or skull rack) adjacent to the Templo Mayor. When fully excavated, it contained hundreds of human skulls, many embedded in a lime mortar matrix. The sheer scale of the find, and the way the skulls were arranged, confirmed Spanish descriptions of these structures while also revealing details the written accounts did not capture.

The Chinampas: Engineering Food Security

Tenochtitlan's most remarkable engineering achievement may not have been its pyramids but its food system. The surrounding lake was converted into a network of chinampas — raised agricultural plots built by layering lake mud and organic matter over a frame of woven reeds anchored to the lakebed. Often called 'floating

gardens' (they don't actually float, but they are extremely fertile), chinampas could produce multiple harvests per year and supplied a significant portion of the city's food. The chinampa system around Tenochtitlan covered thousands of hectares and required constant maintenance to prevent waterlogging and salt intrusion. The xochimilco region south of Mexico City still contains functioning chinampa gardens, now designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Archaeological and biological studies of these surviving chinampas have given researchers insight into how the Aztec managed soil fertility, water levels, and crop rotation. The system was sophisticated enough to sustain one of the world's largest cities without depleting the land — a record of environmental management that modern agricultural scientists continue to study.

Archaeology Under a Living City

Excavating Tenochtitlan is uniquely difficult because it lies beneath one of the most densely populated cities on earth. Mexico City has a population of over 21 million people, and every time a subway line is extended, a building foundation is dug, or a utility trench is opened, there is a chance of encountering Aztec remains. The city has developed a sophisticated system of salvage archaeology — rapid response excavation teams who document and recover material before construction continues. The Mexico City subway system has become inadvertently one of the richest sources of Aztec archaeological data; its construction since the 1960s has uncovered temples, canals, and thousands of artifacts. Since 2017, a new phase of Templo Mayor excavation has focused on finding the burial chamber of the Aztec emperor Ahuizotl, who ruled from 1486 to 1502. Archaeologists believe his tomb may lie in an unexcavated section beneath the modern street. The search involves ground-penetrating radar surveys, remote sensing, and careful excavation of waterlogged layers where organic materials — wood, textiles, food remains — may be preserved. If found, a royal Aztec burial at this level of preservation would be without precedent.

Key Information: Tenochtitlan and the Templo Mayor

Detail	Information
Location	Island in Lake Texcoco; modern-day downtown Mexico City

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Population at Peak	200,000-300,000 (one of the world's largest cities c. 1500 CE)
Founded	Traditionally 1325 CE; earliest confirmed construction layers c. 1325-1375
Destroyed	1521 CE during the Spanish siege led by Hernan Cortes
Coyolxauhqui Stone	Discovered 1978, 3.25m diameter, 8 tons; triggered Templo Mayor excavations
Templo Mayor Layers	Seven successive pyramids built one over another by successive rulers
Offering Caches Found	More than 200 deposits containing coastal, regional, and ritual objects
Chinampas	Raised agricultural plots in the lake; still functioning in Xochimilco
Lead Archaeologist	Eduardo Matos Moctezuma; excavations ongoing since 1978
Current Search	Burial chamber of Emperor Ahuizotl, believed beneath modern street level

Case Study: Marco's Unexpected Discovery

Marco Hernandez has been working for the Mexico City electric company for eleven years. On a Tuesday morning in October, his crew is digging a trench to replace aging water mains in a neighborhood just east of the historic center. They are about two meters down when Marco's colleague Jorge pulls up a shovelful of dark soil and something ceramic clinks against the side of the trench. Marco reaches in and pulls out a fragment of painted pottery — reddish clay with geometric patterns he doesn't recognize. Jorge says to toss it aside and keep digging. They are behind schedule and the neighborhood liaison has already called twice asking when the water will be restored. Marco knows they are supposed to stop and call the Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia any time they find something, but he also knows that procedure can mean a crew sitting idle for a week while bureaucrats figure out what to do. He holds the pottery shard and thinks about the story his grandmother used to tell about her grandmother, who grew up in this neighborhood when it was still called something else, before it was renamed. Marco calls it in. The INAH team arrives the next morning. The water restoration is delayed five days.

1. Marco chooses to follow the legal reporting requirement even at a personal and professional cost. What does his choice reveal about the ongoing tension between urban infrastructure needs and archaeological preservation in a city built on top of a major ancient site?

2. The reading describes how Mexico City's subway construction has inadvertently produced valuable archaeological data. What does this suggest about how cities should approach development in areas of known archaeological significance?

Multiple Choice

1. What was the Templo Mayor dedicated to, and what did this dual dedication represent?

a) Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, representing the two pillars of Aztec power: war and agriculture

b) The founding rulers of Tenochtitlan, deified after death

c) The sun and the moon, representing the cosmic battle at the heart of Aztec religion every day

d) One god of death and one of agriculture, representing the Aztec fear of famine

2. What made the 1978 discovery of the Coyolxauhqui stone significant beyond the artifact itself?

a) It proved that Aztec religion was entirely different from Spanish descriptions

b) It was the first evidence that Tenochtitlan had ever existed

c) It settled a debate about the location of the Aztec emperor's burial chamber

d) It triggered a major urban excavation project that has continued for decades

3. What is unique about the agricultural system the Aztec developed around Tenochtitlan?

a) It depended on terraced hillside farming modeled on Inca techniques

b) It imported all food from conquered territories through the imperial tribute system

c) It relied on chinampas, raised lake-bed plots producing multiple harvests a year

d) It used floating islands of soil that drifted to wherever crops were needed

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Chinampa	A) The Aztec moon goddess whose stone disc, found in 1978, triggered the Templo Mayor excavations
2. ___ Tzompantli	B) A raised agricultural plot built in a lake by layering mud and organic matter over a reed frame
3. ___ Coyolxauhqui	C) Wide raised roads built across the lake connecting Tenochtitlan to the mainland
4. ___ Salvage archaeology	D) A skull rack used in Aztec ritual; a large example was found adjacent to the Templo Mayor
5. ___ Causeways	E) Rapid-response excavation carried out before construction continues, as practiced throughout Mexico City

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan was connected to the mainland by three massive _____, wide enough for ten horses to ride abreast.

2. The Templo Mayor was built in seven successive layers, each new ruler building a new pyramid _____ its predecessor.

3. The chinampa gardens at _____ south of Mexico City still function today and are designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why is excavating Tenochtitlan uniquely challenging compared to most other major archaeological sites in the world?

2. What do the more than 200 offering caches found inside the Templo Mayor reveal about the Aztec Empire's reach and organization?

3. The reading notes that Spanish soldiers were stunned by the scale and beauty of Tenochtitlan. Given what you now know about the city, why is it historically significant that it was demolished and built over rather than preserved?