Animated Map: Where Are the Largest Cities Throughout History?

For much of human history, most people did not live in cities.
Cities—settlements that are densely populated and self-administered—require many specific prerequisites to come into existence. The most crucial, especially for much of human history, is an abundance of food.

Surplus food production leads to denser populations and allows for people to specialize in other skills that are not associated with basic human survival.
But that also means that cities usually consume more primary goods than they produce. And their size requires a host of many other services—such as transport and sanitation—that are traditionally expensive to maintain. So maintaining large urban centers, and especially the world's largest cities, was a monumental task.

Mapper and history YouTuber **Ollie Bye** has visualized the seven largest cities in the world since 3,000 BCE. His video covers cities with a minimum population of 10,000 and hints at historical events which led to the establishment, growth, and eventual fall of cities.

The World's Largest City Throughout History

With any historical data, accuracy is always a concern, and urban populations were rough and infrequent estimates up until the Industrial Revolution.

Bye has used a variety of data sources—including the UN and many research papers—to create the dataset used in the video.
In some places he also had to rely on his own estimates and criteria to keep the data reasonable and consistent:

- In early history, some cities didn't have given population estimates for long periods of time, and had to be equalized or estimated through other sources. For example, **Babylon** had a population estimate at 1,600 BCE (60,000) and at 1,200 BCE (75,000) but none in the 400 years between.
- Cities that only briefly climbed above a population of 10,000, or that would have made the largest cities ranking for only a couple of years (and based on uncertain estimates), were not included.

Here's a look at the largest city starting from the year 3,000 BCE, with populations listed in millions during the last year of each city's "reign." Cities are also listed with the flags of current-day countries in the same location.

Time Period	Largest City	Population (Millions)	Country
3000-2501 BCE	Uruk	0.08	Iraq

Time Period	Largest City	Population (Millions)	Country
2500-2251 BCE	Lagash	0.06	Iraq
2250-2001 BCE	Girsu	0.08	Iraq
2000-1751 BCE	Isin	0.04	Iraq
1750-1251 BCE	Babylon	0.06	Iraq
1250-1001 BCE	Pi-Ramesses	0.16	Egypt
1000-601 BCE	Thebes	0.12	Egypt
600-301 BCE	Babylon	0.20	Iraq
300-201 BCE	Carthage	0.40	Tunisia
200 BCE-270 CE	Alexandria	0.60	Egypt
Time Period	Largest City	Population (Millions)	Country
271-350 CE	Rome	0.39	Italy
351-500 CE	Constantinople	0.49	Turkey
501-640 CE	Ctesiphon	0.50	Iraq
641-644 CE	Constantinople	0.40	Turkey
645-795 CE	Chang'an	0.59	China
796-963 CE	Baghdad	1.10	Iraq
964-975 CE	Constantinople	0.32	Turkey
976-984 CE	Córdoba	0.33	Spain
985-1144 CE	Bian	0.44	China
1145-1199 CE	Constantinople	0.24	Turkey

Time Period	Largest City	Population (Millions)	Country
Time Period	Largest City	Population (Millions)	Country
1200-1275 CE	Lin'an	0.36	China
1276-1278 CE	Cairo	0.37	Egypt
1279-1315 CE	Hangzhou	0.43	China
1316-1348 CE	Cairo	0.50	Egypt
1349-1353 CE	Hangzhou	0.43	China
1344-1380 CE	Cairo	0.35	Egypt
1381-1394 CE	Vijayanagara	0.36	India
1395-1426 CE	Yingtian	0.50	China
1427-1441 CE	Vijayanagara	0.44	India
1442-1612 CE	Beijing	0.70	China
Time Period	Largest City	Population (Millions)	Country
1613-1678 CE	Constatinople	0.74	Turkey
1679-1720 CE	Dhaka	0.78	Bangladesh
1721-1826 CE	Beijing	1.30	China
1827-1918 CE	London	7.40	UK
1919-1954 CE	New York	13.20	U.S.
1955-Present	Tokyo	37.30	Japan

Ancient Cities in the Fertile Crescent

Considered the "cradle of civilization," the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East was home to all seven of the largest cities in the world in 3,000 BCE.

The Sumerian city of **Uruk** (modern-day Iraq), allegedly home to the legendary king Gilgamesh, topped the list with 40,000 people. It was followed by **Memphis** (Egypt) with 20,000 inhabitants.

For the next 1,700 years, other Mesopotamian cities in modern-day Iraq and Syria held pole positions, growing steadily and shuffling between themselves as the largest.

2,250 BCE marked the first time a different Asian city—**Mohenjo-Daro** (modern-day Pakistan) from the Indus Valley Civilization—found a spot at #4 with 40,000 people.

The table below is a quick snapshot of the seven largest cities in the world for from 3,000 BCE to 200 CE. Again, populations are listed in millions.

Rank	3000 BCE	2250 BCE	1250 BCE	200 CE
1	Uruk (0.04)	Girsu (0.08)	Pi-Ramesses (0.16)	Alexandria (0.60)
2	Memphis (0.02)	Mari (0.05)	Yin (0.12)	Pataliputra (0.35)
3	Umma (0.02)	Umma (0.04)	Thebes (0.08)	Carthage (0.20)
4	Nagar (0.02)	Mohenjo-daro (0.04)	Sapinuwa (0.07)	Luoyang (0.20)
5	Lagash (0.02)	Akkad (0.03)	Babylon (0.07)	Seleucia (0.20)
6	Larak (0.01)	Uruk (0.03)	Hattusa (0.06)	Pergamon (0.20)
7	Eridu (0.01)	Memphis (0.03)	Uruk (0.03)	Taxila (0.10)

It wasn't until **1,250 BCE** that the top two spots were taken by cities in different regions: **Pi-Ramesses** (Egypt) and **Yin** (China), both with more than **100,000** residents.

Egyptian cities would continue to be the most populous for the next millennium— briefly interrupted by Carthage and Babylon—until the start of the Common Era. By 30 CE, **Alexandria** was the largest city in the world, but the top 10 had representatives from the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Asia.

All Roads Lead to Rome

One city in Europe meanwhile, was also beginning to see steady growth—**Rome**. It took until halfway through the 3rd century C.E. for Rome to become the most populous city, followed closely still by Alexandria (Egypt). Meanwhile in Iraq, **Ctesiphon**, the capital of the Sasanian empire was growing rapidly.

Rank	271 CE	351 CE	501 CE	645 CE
1	Rome (0.39)	Constantinople (0.29)	Ctesiphon (0.41)	Chang'an (0.38)
2	Alexandria (0.37)	Ctesiphon (0.25)	Constantinople (0.40)	Constantinople (0.32)
3	Luoyang (0.20)	Rome (0.24)	Luoyang (0.20)	Kanyakubja (0.24)
4	Vaishali (0.17)	Pataliputra (0.22)	Teotihuacan (0.15)	Luoyang (0.21)
5	Carthage (0.16)	Luoyang (0.20)	Jiankang (0.15)	El Pilar (0.17)
6	Teotihuacan (0.14)	Vaishali (0.16)	Caracol (0.14)	Ctesiphon (0.41)
7	Antioch (0.12)	Teotihuacan (0.15)	Chang'an (0.10)	Teotihuacan (0.15)

Towards the end of the 3rd century, the Roman empire was divided into two, with **Constantinople** becoming the new capital for the Eastern half. Consequently, it had outgrown Rome by 353 and become the world's most populous city, and for the next few centuries would reclaim this title time and time again.

The Largest Cities Reach 1 Million

In the 9th century, **Baghdad** became the first city to have **1 million** residents (though historians also estimate **Rome** and the Chinese city of **Chang'an** may have achieved that figure earlier).

It would be nearly nine centuries until a city had one million inhabitants again, and Baghdad's reign didn't last long. By the 10th century, **Bian**, the capital of the Northern Song dynasty in China, had become the largest city in the world, with Baghdad suffering from relocations and shifting political power to other cities in the region.

Rank	850 CE	985 CE	1316 CE	1381 CE
1	Baghdad (1.00)	Bian (0.35)	Cairo (0.44)	Vijayanagara (0.36)

Rank	850 CE	985 CE	1316 CE	1381 CE
2	Chang'an (0.60)	Córdoba (0.33)	Hangzhou (0.43)	Cairo (0.35)
3	Constantinople (0.27)	Constantinople (0.32)	Dadu (0.40)	Paris (0.29)
4	Kanyakubja (0.21)	Angkor (0.18)	Paris (0.25)	Yingtian (0.27)
5	Luoyang (0.20)	Baghdad (0.17)	Kamakura (0.20)	Hangzhou (0.23)
6	Bian (0.17)	Kyoto (0.15)	Guangzhou (0.15)	Beiping (0.15)
7	Córdoba (0.16)	Cairo (0.12)	Fez (0.14)	Tabriz (0.14)

From the 12th century onwards, Mongol invasions in the Middle East and Central Asia severely limited population growth in the region. European cities too were ravaged in the 14th century, but by plagues instead of marauders.
For the next few hundred years, **Cairo** (Egypt), **Hangzhou** (China), and **Vijayanagara** (India) would top the list until **Beijing** took (and mostly held onto) the top spot through the 19th century.

Industrial Revolution and Rapid Urbanization

The start of the Industrial Revolution in the UK—spreading to the rest of Europe and later on the U.S.—led to hitherto unseen levels of urban population growth. Factories needed labor, which caused mass emigration from the rural countryside to urban centers of growth.
In 1827, **London** passed Beijing to become the largest city in the world with **1.3 million** residents. Over the next 100 years, its population increased **nearly 7 times**, remaining the most populous city until the end of World War I, by which time it was overtaken by **New York**.

Rank	1442	1851	1919	1955
1	Beijing (0.51)	London (2.2)	New York (7.6)	Tokyo (13.7)
2	Vijayanagara (0.44)	Beijing (1.6)	London (7.4)	New York (13.2)
3	Cairo (0.37)	Paris (1.3)	Paris (4.7)	Osaka (8.6)

Rank	1442	1851	1919	1955
4	Hangzhou (0.24)	Guangzhou (0.87)	Tokyo (4.3)	London (8.2)
5	Tabriz (0.21)	Constantinople (0.71)	Berlin (3.7)	Paris (6.7)
6	Nanjing (0.18)	Edo (0.78)	Chicago (2.9)	Buenos Aires (5.9)
7	Granada (0.15)	New York (0.56)	Vienna (1.9)	Moscow (5.7)

From 1920 to 2022, the world population quadrupled thanks to improvements in farming and healthcare, and cities saw rapid growth as well. The beginning of the 20st century saw the top 10 largest cities in the world in the U.S., Europe, and Japan.

By the 21st century however, growth shifted away to other parts of the world and by 2021, the top seven had cities only from Asia and the Americas.

Rank	1970	1990	2000	2021
1	Tokyo (23.2)	Tokyo (32.7)	Tokyo (34.3)	Tokyo (37.3)
2	New York (16.1)	Osaka (18.5)	Osaka (18.6)	New Delhi (31.1)
3	Osaka (15.2)	New York (16.2)	Mexico City (18.4)	Shanghai (27.7)
4	Mexico City (8.8)	Mexico City (15.9)	New York (17.8)	Sao Paulo (22.2)
5	Buenos Aires (8.4)	Sao Paulo (15.0)	Sao Paulo (17.0)	Mexico City (21.9)
6	Los Angeles (8.3)	Bombay (12.7)	Mumbai (16.1)	Dhaka (21.7)
7	Paris (8.2)	Buenos Aires (11.2)	New Delhi (15.6)	Beijing (20.8)

Tokyo, which took the top spot in 1954, is the largest city in the world today with a population of **37 million** (including the entire metropolitan area).

It is followed by **New Delhi** with **31 million**, but by 2028, the UN estimates that positions will switch on the leaderboard and New Delhi will overtake Tokyo.

What Does Population Growth Say About the Past (and Future)?

The rise and fall of cities through the sands of time can give us insight into the trajectory of civilization growth. As civilizations grow, become richer, and reach their zenith, so too do their cities blossom in tandem.

For example, of the modern-day seven largest cities in the world, four of them belong to countries with the 10 largest economies in the world.
Meanwhile, sudden falls in urban population point to turbulence—political instability, wars, natural disasters, or disease.

Most recently Ukraine's cities are seeing depopulation as residents flee conflict zones, raising the specter of a demographic crisis for the country should the war continue.
Thus, tracking the size of urban population can help policymakers forecast future roadblocks to growth, especially when prioritizing sustainable growth for a country.

By
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Source

[Animated Map: Where Are the Largest Cities Throughout History? (visualcapitalist.com)](#)