

El dorado



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The legend of El Dorado who would not want to embark on a journey to find a city that is built solely out of gold and bathes him or herself in extreme wealth? Many films, such as *Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull* (2008) or *The Road to El Dorado* (2000) and books have used this particular legend as ultimate treasure.

There are several mythical locations or sites that can be compared to El Dorado, such as Troy, the city that was besieged by the Ancient Greek and fell to cunning idea of one of the Greek generals, or the city of Atlantis that sank into the ocean in a single day and night of misfortune or some neighboring equivalents as Omagua, the Land of Cinnamon, or the golden land of Manoa. But what is the actual legend of El Dorado?

According to the traveller Juan Rodriguez Freyle, who wrote *El Carnero: Conquista y descubrimiento del Nuevo Reino de Granada*, the Muisca, a tribe who were to be found in what we know as the central highlands of present-day Colombia, appointed each year a chieftain and rolled him in gold, which he then ceremonially washed off in the sacred lake of Guatavita, casting offerings of emeralds and gold into the waters at the same time. This custom had apparently disappeared long before the coming of the conquistadors, but the tales lived on and grew into a legend of a land of gold and plenty.

What started as story about a single person covered in gold, which was recorded in 1531 when Diego de Ordaz's lieutenant Martinez encountered El Dorado himself, by the time Pedro de Ursdias initiated an expedition in 1559 to search for El Dorado, it had become a golden land rather than Martinez's golden man. Diego de Ordaz and Pedro de Ursdias being both explorers

under the Spanish flag, embodies the mental picture of wandering conquistadors.

It is quite simple to imagine that in the period of the first landings in what we call South America nowadays, legends such as the one of El Dorado inspired people to initiate expeditions in search of this majestic land. How is it possible that an actual recording of an encounter evolved into a land of unimaginable riches and gold in less than three decades? And has the search for El Dorado come to an end in this modern time where scientists can scan the earth's surface with the help of satellites and air photography, and where practically nothing is a secret anymore thanks to the World Wide Web?

Or can the term El Dorado be used as a metaphor for modern fortune seekers in different layers of the population? When hearing about a quest for El Dorado, nine out of ten people imagine Spanish conquistadors trying to survive in the Amazonian wilderness, being empowered by the thought of extreme wealth that awaits them if they were to find the legendary land of El Dorado. Although the banks of the Amazon River were under Spanish control, this search for this land was not exclusively for the conquistadors.

In 1594 an English Lord, Sir Walter Raleigh came into possession of an account of Spanish origin of a great golden city at the headwaters of the Caroni River. A year later he explored what is now Guyana and eastern Venezuela in search of this city of gold. This was one of the most famous expeditions set out by the British. A great number of these sorts of expeditions ended by failing to find El Dorado, but these explorations accounted for the coverage and mapping of unknown territory, due more to the conquistadors, than to any other single reason.

An expedition that was led by Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett, which led to the disappearance of himself, his son Jack and his son's best friend Raleigh. The New York Times has estimated that more expeditions have set out to discover Fawcett's fate than were ever launched to discover El Dorado itself. One of the main reasons that El Dorado has become a myth of great expectations lies of course in the fact that during the early landings in the Americas no one from the Old World could understand one of the native languages.

With accounts of the stories of the Muisca and their offerings of gold reaching the Caribbean Sea, it is fair to say that slight mistranslation is bound to happen, even between indigenous tribes whom live in the same area. And when the conquistadors eventually taught some indigenous people to understand and speak Spanish, so that these select few could translate the intentions of the Spaniards for their fellow tribe members, the story of El Dorado became known to the conquistadors.

Even Columbus on one of his voyages established the fact that the indigenous people had access to gold, which is depicted in the movie *Tambien La Lluvia*(2011), and summoned them to pay taxes in the form of gold. It is quite imaginable that the greed of the conquistadors took over and that they the indigenous people under pressure to tell the conquistadors where to find more gold. And with the stories of the Muisca being widespread, albeit mistranslated over the years, it is possible that this particular story reached the conquistadors through these select few translators.

Though the legend of El Dorado inspired numerous people, during the 16th and the 17th century 750. 000 people moved from Portugal and Spain to cross over the Atlantic Ocean, there are some accounts of people who sought to “ consign El Dorado once and for all to the past, and to cleanse geography of this anachronism”. During the 1700s some renown authors and scientists, some of them connected to the Public Assembly of the French Academie des Sciences, called the city of El Dorado a ‘ belle chimere’: a beautiful dream.

During the 1800’s the colonial territories of Spain began to fight against their oppression and this gave the British a great opportunity to gain access to a complete new and potential trade market. The fact that Spain had a monopoly in these regions was a great thorn in the eye of the British. Unlike the Spanish, who sought unimaginable fortune in the Americas, the British saw numerous other business opportunities in the agricultural and general trade markets. Not only there was a great difference in goals between the Spanish and British “ occupants”, the type of people who travelled to South America differed greatly.

Where the Spaniards were mostly conquistadors with violent intentions, the British consisted mostly out of scientists and businessmen. Another difference between the Spaniards and the British was the symbolism each other gave to the term El Dorado. For Spaniards, El Dorado stood for “ error, fantasy and violent desire“, but for the British El Dorado stood for “ the golden future awaiting South America as it joined the family of trading nations”. Unfortunately this point of view did not last long.

Just like any other British colonized country or region, such as the West Indies or India, the British did not bring the “golden future” but continued to oppress the indigenous people as well as the Mestizos and the Creoles. Where the Spaniards, and especially the missionaries, tried to “disindianize” the indigenous people, the British scope of humanitarian possibilities was much narrower. According to numerous British scientists, such as Edward Stanley or Anthony Trollope, “both descendants of Spaniards and the indigenous inhabitants were deemed congenitally apathetic and irredeemably incapable of discipline, efficiency, or change”.

Besides the humanitarian consequences, this new found El Dorado-ideal led, according to the British naturalist Alfred R. Wallace, “to convert the virgin forest into green meadows and fertile plantations.”, and what we know now was the beginning of major deforestation of the Amazon jungle which continues today with a speed of 11, 968 km² [4620. 870 sq mi] in 2008. As mentioned earlier, the expedition of Colonel Fawcett in the early twentieth century was a failure and led to his disappearance, but what is interesting is the believe Fawcett had in the existence of El Dorado.

Fawcett was a strong believer of theosophy, a doctrine of religious philosophy and mysticism introduced by Helena Blavatsky. Strengthened by his beliefs, Fawcett thought that he had the key of finding El Dorado, because theosophy has the ideology that there is a hidden world that could be “unlocked by the keys of seers and seances”. If one keeps this ideology in mind, it is possible that there are unknown lands and locations, which are only accessible through difficult and spiritual rituals.

Of course to many people this sounds as a farfetched idea, but the same people do have a dream of finding such a place, as depicted in Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull (2011). But to include El Dorado among these kinds of unknown lands or locations is arguable. There are too many records of this city of gold being a figment of imagination of the conquistadors and that El Dorado stood for something else, that El Dorado can be placed among the tales of the Mayas or the Incas. Next to the historic records, scientists of today have the access to satellites and other equipment to scan every millimeter of this earth's surface.

For example, the worldwide known program Google Earth allows everyone with access to a computer and (broadband) internet to view the earth on levels which people could not imagine ten years ago. So it is quite difficult for mythical cities to remain hidden in modern times. Due to this development, not only in science but also socially, the term El Dorado is not bound to attract as many people to a certain region as it did when there still was a slight chance of finding this city. Nowadays El Dorado is more a term to express someone his or her ultimate dream or goal.

Just as when someone is defeated at a certain stage or area, it is possible to say that he or she "found his/her Waterloo", the Belgium village where Napoleon was defeated by the combined armies of the Seventh Coalition, an Anglo-Allied army under the command of the Duke of Wellington combined with a Prussian army under the command of Gebhard von Blucher. Or to include a biblical telling, when people do not understand each other, one can say that "it is like building the tower of Babel", where God gave the people different languages so that they could not complete their tower which was

meant to reach into the heavens. So to come back to the earlier questions asked; how is it possible that an actual recording of an encounter evolved into a land of unimaginable riches and gold in less than three decades? This was quite simple to explain, due to the fact that the Spaniards did not understand the different native languages, and when they finally had the knowledge to translate, this still was not a guarantee that the translation was correct.

Slight mistranslation is even in these modern times a problem one can encounter, what to think of the Spaniards who (re)discovered a whole new continent. And has the search for El Dorado come to an end in this modern time where scientists can scan the earth's surface with the help of satellites and air photography, and where practically nothing is a secret anymore thanks to the World Wide Web? Or can the term El Dorado be used as a metaphor for modern fortune seekers in different layers of the population?

Yes, the search for the original El Dorado has come to an end in this modern time, but it is surprising that in the early twentieth century several expeditions were started. As scientists can use highly advanced tools to research even the tiniest molecule, it is practically impossible to hide an entire golden city. But when someone mentions El Dorado, it is most likely used as a metaphor for his or her ultimate goal. El Dorado may have been a myth of a city solely built with gold, it is still everyone's dream to find their own El Dorado and bathe him or herself in extreme wealth.