Lake Parime and the Golden City

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Old World Auctions

The history of Lake Parime cannot be fully explained without first discussing El Dorado, known as the Golden City. The term El Dorado was first used by Europeans to describe the chief of the Chibcha (or Muisca) tribe in Colombia, who was said to practice a ritual involving gold. In an initiation ceremony for the new chief, the chief was covered in gold dust prior to being cleansed in the sacred Lake Guatavita, while additional offerings of gold, emeralds, and other gems were tossed into the water. This ceremony is described in the accounts of several European explorers, including Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo (1541), Juan de Castellanos (c. 1588), and Juan Rodriguez Freyle (1638). Thus "El Dorado" initially was used to signify "the golden man."

The accounts of the ceremony and "the golden man" eventually transformed into the myth of a golden city, named El Dorado, which lay on the banks of a large lake. Spanish Conquistadores were aware of the gold, silver and precious stones of South America in the early 16th century, and sought to exploit these riches well before the legend of El Dorado took shape. The presence of gold and silver among the Inca and other native tribes of South America fueled both the myth of El Dorado and the desire of Europeans to find these riches. This mythical city captured the imagination and fascination of Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English, and German explorers for two centuries, resulting in many ill-fated attempts to find El Dorado.

The earliest explorers focused their efforts in the Andes mountains, particularly in Peru and Colombia, the locations of the Inca and Chibcha tribes. When these expeditions failed to find the fabled city, explorers began to venture farther east. After being appointed governor of Quito in 1541, Spaniard Gonzalo Pizarro, brother of Francisco Pizarro, conquerer of the Incan Empire, set forth eastward with Francisco de Orellana to find El Dorado. The expedition proved fatal to the majority of the 4,000 men accompanying the journey, primarily due to starvation, disease, and attacks from natives. Pizarro abandoned the expedition but ordered Orellana to continue downstream. Although the search for El Dorado was a failure, Orellana eventually reached the Atlantic Ocean and was credited with discovering the Amazon River.

Jodocus Hondius Sr., *Nieuwe Caerte van het Wonderbaer ende Goudrycke Landt Guiana*, 1596.

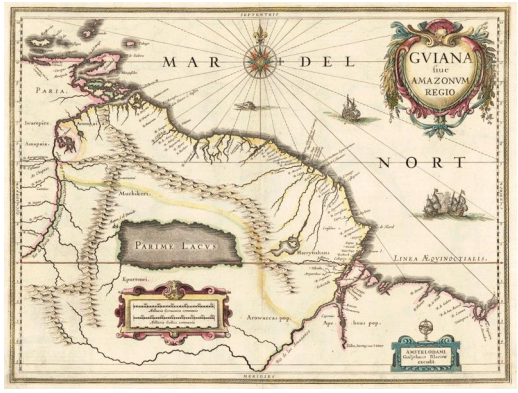
Jodocus Hondius Sr., *Americae Meridionalis*, 1606.

In 1584, Spaniard Antonio de Berrio was determined to find El Dorado from the Orinoco River. He was encouraged by the account of Juan Martinez, believed to be Juan Martin de Albujar, who had taken part in Pedro de Silva's expedition of the area in 1570, only to fall into the hands of the Caribs of the Lower Orinoco. Martinez claimed that he was taken to the golden city in blindfold, was entertained by the natives, and then left the city and couldn't remember how to return. Berrio made several attempts to find the golden city, but was hindered by the terrain and by hostile Indians.

The myth of El Dorado came to the attention of Sir Walter Raleigh, who led an expedition to Guiana in 1595, first capturing Berrio in Trinidad to learn more about the golden city and its whereabouts. Like many explorers before him, Raleigh's attempt to find the city was unsuccessful. Raleigh ordered another expedition in 1596, led by Lawrence Keymis, who reported that the golden city stood on the shores of a lake known as Parime. Raleigh then published *The Discoverie of the Large Rich, and Bewtiful Empyre of Guiana with a Relation of the Great and Golden Citie of Manoa (which the Spaniards Call El Dorado)* in which his discoveries and knowledge of the fabled city were greatly exaggerated. The book was well received and served to popularize the fabled city of Manoa on the edge of Lake Parime.

As a result of Raleigh's work, maps began to appear depicting El Dorado and Lake Parime. One of the first was the elder Jodocus Hondius' *Nieuwe Caerte van het Wonderbaer ende Goudrycke Landt Guiana*, which was published in 1596 and was based on Raleigh's work. Hondius' map depicts an elongated Lake Parime south of the Orinoco River, with the majority of the lake positioned south of the equator, and with Manoa on the northern shore, towards the eastern half of the lake. Manoa is noted as "the greatest city in the entire world." Hondius' map was subsequently copied by Theodore de Bry and published in his popular *Grands Voyages* in 1599. When Hondius published a completely revised edition of Mercator's *Atlas* in 1606, it included a map of South America featuring Lake Parime with the majority of the lake located south of the equator, and with Manoa again along the northern shore, although perhaps not quite so far east.

Hessel Gerritsz, *Guiana sive Provinciae intra Rio de las Amazonas atque Rio de Yuiapari sive Orinoque*, 1625.



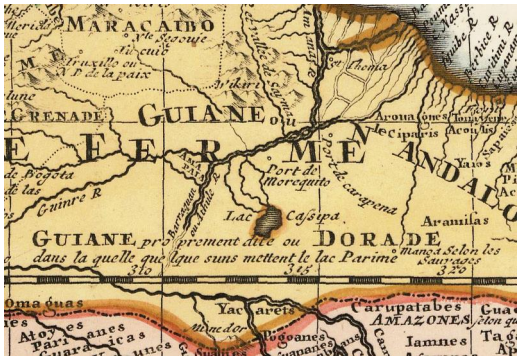
Willem Blaeu, *Guiana sive Amazonum Regio*, 1630.

The story of the golden city on the shore Lake Parime continued to spread, and began to appear on most maps of South America and Guyana throughout the 17th century. In contrast to previous representations of Lake Parime, Hessel Gerritsz created a map of

Guyana with an enormous and almost rectangular Parime Lacus just north of the equator, and "Manoa, o el Dorado" now on the northwestern shore. Gerritsz' map was first published in 1625 in Johannes de Laet's *Nieuwe Wereldt ofte Beschrijvinghe van West-Indien*. (The author has not yet determined what caused Gerritsz to alter the shape of Lake Parime or to move the Golden City to its northwestern shore.) In the 1629 edition of Jodocus Hondius Jr.'s *Atlantis Maioris Appendix*, a new map of Guiana was added that was a close copy of Gerritsz' map. Upon Jodocus Hondius Jr's death in 1629, Willem Blaeu purchased about 40 of his copperplates, including the map of Guiana, and republished it with his own name substituting that of Hondius, first in his 1630 *Atlantis Appendix* and then in numerous Blaeu atlases through 1670.

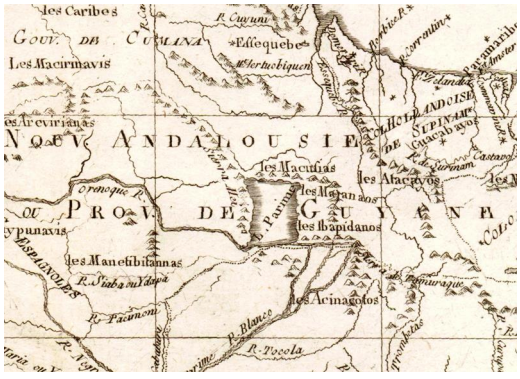
By the turn of the 18th century, Lake Parime and El Dorado begin disappearing from maps, with cartographers calling its existence into question. On Vicenzo Maria Coronelli's two-sheet map of South America, first published in 1691, a conjectural Lake Parime is depicted with a note explaining that although the majority of geographers place the lake with Manoa on its western shore, the account is "fantastical." Guillaume Delisle does not depict Lake Parime on his map of South America dated 1700, but he does note the possibility of its existence and locates "Manoa selon les sauvages" (Manoa according to the savages). In 1705, Pierre Moullart-Sanson published a map of South America with an unnamed lake in the area of Lake Parime, but without any mention of Manoa.

Vicenzo Maria Coronelli, *America Meridionale*, 1691.

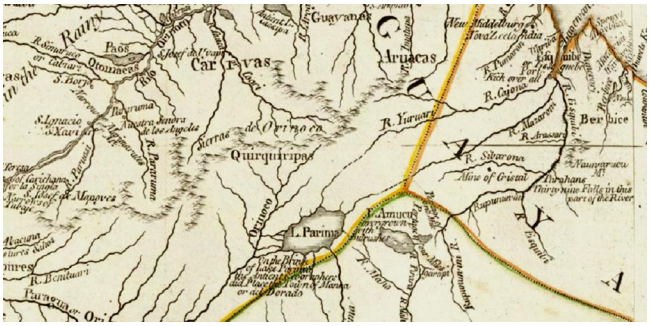


Guillaume de L'Isle, *L'Amerique Meridionale Dressee sur les Observations de Mrs. De l'Academie Royale des Sciences*, 1700.

Pierre Moullart-Sanson, *Amerique Meridionale Divisee Suivant les Regions les Souverainetes les Religions et les Langues*, 1705.



Rigobert Bonne, *Carte du Nouv. Rme. de Grenade*, 1780.



Robery Sayer, *A Map of South America Containing Tierra-Firma, Guayana, New Granada, Amazonia, Brasil, Peru, Paraguay, Chaco, Tucuman, Chili and Patagonia. From Mr. d'Anville with Several Improvements and Additions, and the Newest Discoveries*, 1787.

Despite the lack of scientific evidence for Lake Parime and El Dorado, they still appeared on a few maps even towards the end of the 18th century. Rigobert Bonne's map *Carte du Nouv. Rme. de Grenade*, circa 1780, shows a rectangular-shaped Lake Parime oriented north-south and located further to the east, with no city on its shores. And Robert Sayer's map of South America dated 1787 shows Lake Parime and includes a note on Manoa. The legend wasn't disproved until Alexander von Humboldt's expedition through Latin America from 1799-1804. Humboldt's extensive survey of the Guyana river basins and lakes led him to conclude that Lake Parime did not exist, and that it was likely inspired by the seasonal flooding at the confluence of rivers. And after two centuries of unsuccessful expeditions for El Dorado, the myth of the golden city disappeared as well.

Although there is a kernel of truth in the fabled Lake Parime and El Dorado, their history is one of great metamorphosis. Over time a gold-clad Chieftain turned into a Golden City, and Lake Guatavita, located near Bogota in the Colombian Andes, transformed into the mythical Lake Parime, located hundreds of miles to the east in Guyana. Despite the fact that Lake Parime and the city of El Dorado were determined to be myths, the name El Dorado began to be used to identify places where one could hope to find wealth and has even served as a metaphor to represent one's ultimate goal.

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