

# The Myth of El Dorado

## Duration

Two or three class sessions of approximately 40 minutes each

## Resources

### 1. Teacher Commentary



### 2. Student Handout



### 3. Homework



## Objectives of Lesson

- To analyze how the search for new sources of wealth led to exploration and conquest in the New World
- To explain the impact of the myth of El Dorado on European exploration in the Americas
- To read a range of historical sources with speaker, audience, and context in mind

## College Board Objectives from the 2020–21 CED

- **Topic 1.3:** European Exploration in the Americas (p. 40)
- **Learning Objective 1.C:** “Explain the causes of exploration and conquest of the New World by various European nations.”
- **Key Concept 1.2.I.A:** “European nations’ efforts to explore and conquer the New World stemmed from a search for new sources of wealth, economic and military competition, and a desire to spread Christianity.”

## Student Activities

- Class reading of historical documents related to the myth of El Dorado
- Analysis of how the search for new sources of wealth contributed to exploration and conquest in the New World by various European nations

## How to Use This Lesson

This lesson is an exploration of the effects of the myth of El Dorado on European exploration in the Americas. European nations sought new sources of wealth in the New World, motivated both by the actual trade goods brought back by the earliest explorers and by mythical tales of unimaginable riches that were said to exist in the unexplored parts of the New World. One of the most powerful myths was that of El Dorado, a myth of a ruler and city

## NOTES

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so rich in gold that the chief of the tribe ritually covered himself in gold dust. The goal of this lesson is to explore the myth of El Dorado in order to provide depth to student’s understanding of the economic motivations of European explorers. By the end of this lesson, students will have a stronger understanding of why European explorers ventured into the new world and a comprehensive understanding of a specific example that could be used to support an argument in either an LEQ or a DBQ.

We recommend that you begin this lesson by providing an overview of the myth of El Dorado. The shape of this introduction can vary based on the tone and approach of your class. You are welcome to use the notes provided below, or you can opt for framing a discussion that relies on pop culture references. For example, the 2000 DreamWorks Animation film *The Road to El Dorado* could serve as an entry point to a broader discussion of the myth. Other pop culture references to the myth of El Dorado are found in *Garo: Vanishing Line*, the 2019 film *Dora and the Lost City of Gold*, and Voltaire’s classic satire *Candide*.

The worksheet included in this lesson focuses on different historical documents related to the myth of El Dorado. For each document, students are asked to complete a HAPPY analysis to explore all aspects of the document. Since there are multiple documents on the worksheet, we encourage you to explore different levels of discussion. For example, you may want to work through the first document as a class, and assign one for individual work or for small group work. The teacher’s commentary includes notes, discussion questions, and annotations that you can use to shape your discussion of the documents.

This lesson also includes a homework assignment that focuses on Topic 1.3 and the myth of El Dorado. For this homework assignment, students will need to complete a HAPPY analysis on a 19th-century text in order to think about how the myth continued to have power in the Americas.

## Historical Context

Although the myth of the wealth of El Dorado was a powerful pull factor that drew Europeans to the Americas, the myth changed drastically. While the earliest explorers sought a person (“el dorado” means “the golden one”), explorers in the 1500s understood El Dorado to be a city rich in gold, and explorers expected to find a full-fledged empire of El Dorado in the 17th century.

The sources included in the worksheet speak to the many different ways that El Dorado was understood by European explorers. As you explore them with your students, encourage them to think about how El Dorado, as an idea, caused Europeans

## NOTES

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to explore new lands. The allure of the myth drew people to the New World, partially because it was so poorly defined. Without a definitive idea of El Dorado, explorers were able to indulge in wild fantasies of massive wealth and stores of gold. A more sharply defined goal could have curtailed their exploration attempts when the first several missions failed to find El Dorado.

Historians think that the earliest ideas of El Dorado, those which were related to El Dorado as a person, can be traced to European accounts of Muisca rituals at Lake Guatavita (near modern-day Bogata). Juan Rodriguez Freyle, who was a soldier in the Spanish colonial army, describes a ceremony in which the zipa (leader) would be completely covered in mud and gold dust, placed on gold raft with a pile of gold and emeralds and several servants, and brought to the middle of Lake Guatavita. Once in the center of the lake, the king and his servants would throw the gold and jewels into the lake as an offering. Juan Rodriguez Freyle's account had a sensational impact in his native Spain, inspiring multiple poems, artistic expressions, and Spanish exploration attempts to find the mythical man bathed in gold.

Over time, the idea of El Dorado changed until the land rich in gold became associated with a lost city rather than simply a single extraordinarily wealthy individual. Europeans came to believe that there was a mysterious city, located in a secret hidden location, that was immensely wealthy. Spanish adventurers, for example, hypothesized that the lost city of El Dorado was so rich as to have streets paved in gold. They were drawn to the mythical city of El Dorado because it was seen as a place where explorers could make their fortunes quickly. The Spanish launched several expeditions to find El Dorado. Some of these expeditions found gold, but none found the level of wealth suggested by the myth.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, European explorers held that El Dorado was located on a mysterious island on Lake Parime in South America. This lesson includes a map that features both Lake Parime and the city of Manoa (another name for El Dorado). Maps like this were common, but problematic, because repeated expeditions by Spanish, English, and German explorers were unable to locate either Lake Parime where it was noted on the map or the mythical city of El Dorado. As you discuss it with your class, consider segueing into a broader discussion of how European explorers often noted what they wanted to find on maps, rather than what was actually there.

The inability of European explorers to locate El Dorado only helped to build the myth's power. The homework includes an excerpt from Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Eldorado" from 1849. In this poem, Poe uses the image of a knight who spent his life looking for El Dorado to speak to the limits of mortality and the search for spiritual treasure. Although it was not produced in

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the time frame covered by Unit 1 like the other two documents highlighted in the lesson, it is still a useful document for students to know in order to understand why European explorers were drawn to the New World. They were drawn so firmly in pursuit of riches that, even centuries later, the same myths continued to have power over society.



*This gold raft represents the original El Dorado myth of a Muisca leader covered in gold making offerings in Lake Guatavita. It was recovered by archaeologists in Bogota, Colombia in 1969. The exact date of the casting is unknown, but it is thought to date between 600 CE and 1600 CE.*

## NOTES

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# The Myth of El Dorado

## Document

### Document 1

①

The ceremony took place on the appointment of a new ruler. Before taking office, he spent some time secluded in a cave, without women, forbidden to eat salt, or to go out during daylight. The first journey he had to make was to go to the great lagoon of Guatavita, to make offerings and sacrifices to the demon which they worshipped as their god and lord. During the ceremony which took place at the lagoon, they made a raft of rushes, embellishing and decorating it with the most attractive things they had. They put on it four lighted braziers in which they burned much moque, which is the incense of these natives, and also resin and many other perfumes. The lagoon was large and deep, so that a ship with high sides could sail on it, all loaded with an infinity of men and women dressed in fine plumes, golden plaques and crowns.... As soon as those on the raft began to burn incense, they also lit braziers on the shore, so that the smoke hid the light of day.

②

At this time, they stripped the heir to his skin, and anointed him with a sticky earth on which they placed gold dust so that he was completely covered with this metal. They placed him on the raft... and at his feet they placed a great heap of gold and emeralds for him to offer to his god. In the raft with him went four principal subject chiefs, decked in plumes, crowns, bracelets, pendants and ear rings all of gold. They, too, were naked, and each one carried his offering...when the raft reached the centre of the lagoon, they raised a banner as a signal for silence.

The gilded Indian then...[threw] out all the pile of gold into the middle of the lake, and the chiefs who had accompanied him did the same on their own accounts.... With this ceremony the new ruler was received, and was recognized as lord and king.

Juan Rodriguez Freyle, *El Carnero de Bogotá*, written 1636–1638

④

⑤

## Commentary

① The Spanish made contact with the Muisca as they were in the midst of constant warfare against aggressive neighbors. Some historians argued that this state of warfare weakened them enough to allow the Spanish to gain a foothold.

② The ceremony described here was used by the Muisca people in Columbia. Prior to 1500, they had a robust and civilization that rivaled the complexity of both the Maya and the Aztecs.

③ Lake Guatavit, which still exists in modern-day Columbia, was considered sacred by the Muisca.

④ Juan Freyle was born in Bogotá to parents who had emigrated from Spain. Before joining the Spanish colonial army, he studied to become a priest at the seminary at San Luis until he was expelled for disrespecting the local bishop.

⑤ *El Carnero* is Freyle's most famous work. It focuses on the first conquistadors in Columbia, one of whom was Freyle's father. Although it is an important historical source given when and where it was written, recent scholarship has suggested that Freyle's account may include rumors, myths, and superstitions alongside its historical descriptions.

## Historical Situation:

*Write or type your response in this area.*

**Check your response:** *Did you use all the information in the caption to determine the historical circumstances of this text? What can you infer about the historical event depicted? Why does the date of this text matter?*

## Audience:

*Write or type your response in this area.*

**Check your response:** *Who was the audience of this document? How do you know? What groups would be less receptive of this type of account? What groups would be more receptive? Why do these factors about audience matter?*

## Point of View:

*Write or type your response in this area.*

**Check your response:** *This document clearly has a distinct point of view. What was it? Why would its point of view matter?*

## Purpose:

*Write or type your response in this area.*

**Check your response:** *What was the purpose of this document? Why does the overall purpose matter?*

## Y:

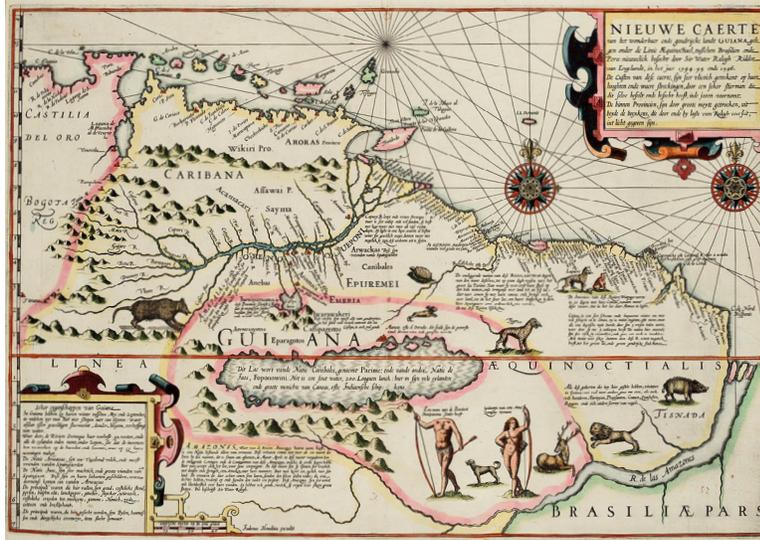
*Write or type your response in this area.*

**Check your response:** *This is the important part to earn this point. Did you explain, in detail, the significance of one of the answers above? Can you show a deeper level of analysis?*

Document 2

⑥

Map of Guiana showing the city of El Dorado on the northeastern shore of a lake by Flemish cartographer Jodocus Hondius, 1598



⑥ This map by Flemish cartographer Jodocus Hondius was produced in Amsterdam in 1598. It is the earliest known depiction of El Dorado as a city on a map. It was most likely based on the accounts of William Downe, the second in command during Sir Walter Raleigh's quests for El Dorado from 1594–1596. It features the mythical Lake Parime which was reported to be the site of El Dorado according to local legends. Most of the rivers and lakes on this map still exist, although El Dorado remains elusive.

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## The Myth of El Dorado

Gaily bedight,  
A gallant knight,  
In sunshine and in shadow,  
Had journeyed long,  
Singing a song,  
In search of Eldorado.

But he grew old—  
This knight so bold—  
And o'er his heart a shadow  
Fell as he found  
No spot of ground  
That looked like Eldorado.

And, as his strength  
Failed him at length,  
He met a pilgrim shadow—  
"Shadow," said he,  
"Where can it be—  
This land of Eldorado?"

"Over the Mountains  
Of the Moon,  
Down the Valley of the Shadow,  
Ride, boldly ride,"  
The shade replied,—  
"If you seek for Eldorado!"

Edgar Allan Poe, *Eldorado*, 1849

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**WORKSHEET****Document 1****1. Historical Situation:**

This account of a religious ritual in the lagoon of Guatavita was produced in the mid 1600s. By this point in time, Spanish explorers and conquistadors had voyaged into many parts of the Americas and observed indigenous cultural practices. They wrote extensively about gold because they were motivated by mercantilism to find precious metals for their voyage sponsors.

**2. Audience:**

This account was most likely intended to provide a Spanish audience in Europe with information about cultural practices in the Spanish colonial empire.

**3. Point of View:**

The point of view of this document is one of a biased outsider. The author is clearly not a part of the cultural community performing the ritual. The author's point of view comes through in his diction. For example, he calls their deity a "demon," which shows both that he is an outsider and that he feels a sense of superiority toward the Muisca.

**4. Purpose:**

The purpose of this document is to provide an account of the rituals at the heart of the myth of El Dorado. It suggests that this myth was already widespread. By providing more information about this ceremony, the author is trying to explain how and why the myth developed.

**5. Y:**

This document is significant because it provides a foundation to the myth of El Dorado. By conjuring up images of indigenous leaders covered in gold dust, it justified Spanish exploration of the Americas in search of new sources of wealth.

## Document 2

### 1. Historical Situation:

This map was produced as a result of the state-sponsored voyages of Sir Walter Raleigh to seek out El Dorado. It demonstrates that there was interest in the fabled city across multiple European nations, not just the Spanish explorers typically associated with the narrative.

### 2. Audience:

The audience for this map was Flemish explorers who had heard Spanish rumors of El Dorado and were eager to seek their own fortunes.

### 3. Point of View:

The point of view of this map was that El Dorado was an actual city that could be located on a map. This point of view suggests that El Dorado was not universally thought of as a myth until much later. For 16th-century cartographers, it was as real and as reachable as any other city.

### 4. Purpose:

The purpose of this map was to guide future explorers to El Dorado.

### 5. Y:

This map is significant because it shows how multiple European nations understood El Dorado to be a literal city that could be placed on a map and accessed by any intrepid explorer. As Europeans sought new sources of wealth in the New World, they used maps like this to guide themselves to places where they thought they could make their fortune more easily.

## HOMEWORK

### 1. Historical Situation:

This poem was produced in the middle of the 19th century, which demonstrates that the myth of El Dorado continued to have power in the Americas. While it was clearly no longer the historical time of conquistadors and physical exploration, El Dorado continued to have power as a concept representing easy wealth and elusive good fortune.

### 2. Audience:

Like most of Edgar Allan Poe's work, this poem was aimed at an American audience.

### 3. Point of View:

The point of view in this poem clearly represents El Dorado as an elusive dream that provides the motivation for action based on the desire for wealth. It also draws attention to how damaging that dream could be in that the gallant knight never reaches his goal, instead spending his whole life searching for something that does not exist.

### 4. Purpose:

The purpose of this map was to critique the desire to always look for something more instead of being satisfied with what can be achieved.

### 5. Y:

This poem is significant because it shows the lasting impact of the myth of El Dorado as a symbolic representation of wealth, even after it had been clearly shown that there was no long-lost city paved with gold in the Americas. It demonstrates how the abstract search for wealth, which inspired European exploration in the Americas, continued to have a pull on the American consciousness many centuries later.