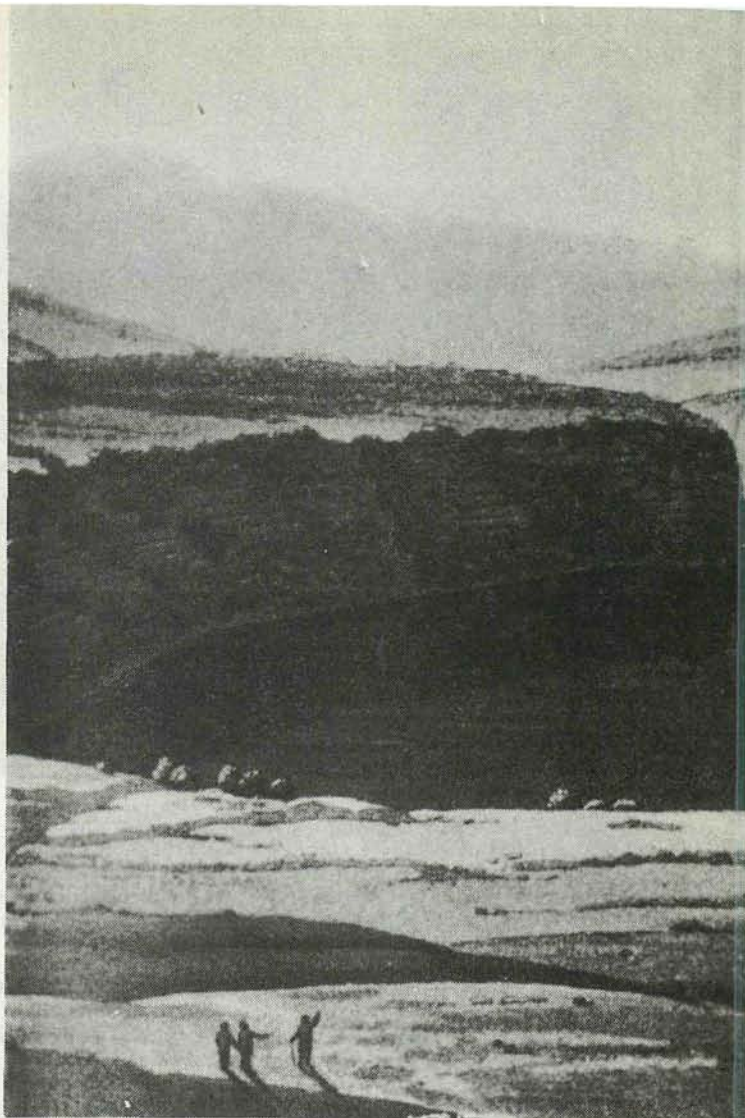


The Draining of Lake Guatavita

By John Hemming

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*ILLUSTRATION:
The mysterious Lake Guatavita as depicted by Alexander von Humboldt.*

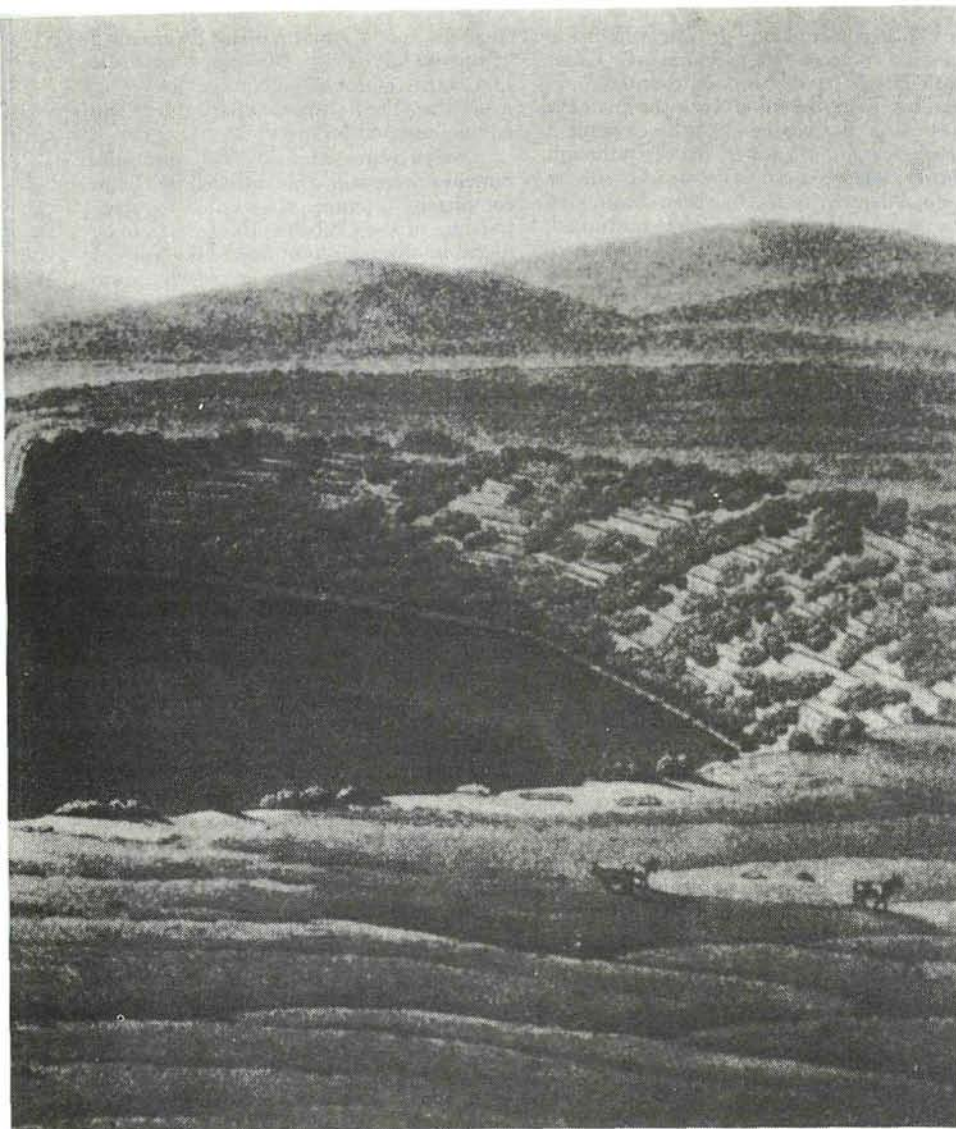


Once the Spaniards learned that the Muisca made offerings in their sacred lakes, a conviction grew that great wealth awaited anyone who could plumb those mysterious waters. Cieza de León, who wrote in Peru in the 1550s, spoke of a 'very large lake in the province of Bogotá from which, if His Majesty would order it to be drained, he would remove a quantity of gold and diamonds [emeralds] that the Indians threw into it in ancient times.'

Lázaro Fonte, Jiménez de Quesada's captain who was in trouble for his outrages against the Indians, may have attempted to drain Lake Guatavita, which lay within his *encomienda*. Pedro Simon said that Lázaro Fonte did try but soon desisted for lack of funds—which seems improbable since Fonte had plenty of subject Indians, and since he left Bogotá soon after the abortive El Dorado expedition of 1541 and went to live in Quito.

The first documented attempt on Lake Guatavita was by Antonio de Sepúlveda, who obtained a royal licence to drain the lake, issued on 22 September 1562. He returned to New Granada and built huts alongside the lake and a boat for soundings. He assembled many Indians

and set them to work, laboriously cutting a trench through which to drain the water. Pedro Simon said that he had to provide quantities of wine to keep his men working on that cold *paramo*. Sepúlveda managed to lower the lake level slightly and found some gold discs and emeralds in the mud at the edge of the lake. Further efforts took him deeper, towards the lake's centre, which was where everyone supposed that the valuable offerings were dropped. Juan Rodríguez Fresle wrote that Sepúlveda's cuttings could still be seen in his day in the 1630s. He wrote that 'a long time later [Sepúlveda] continued to want to make another drainage, but could not. In the end he died poor and exhausted. I knew him well and often conversed with him, and I helped bury him in the church of Guatavita.' Pedro Simon said that Sepúlveda extracted 56,000 pesos of gold objects from Guatavita: Rodríguez Fresle said 12,000 pesos; but the original record of 22 June 1576 has now been found, and it records only '232 pesos and 10 grams of good gold'. In 1625 twelve people from the mining camp of Santa Ana applied for permission to search for treasure in the lake. They obtained the usual elaborate



legal documents, with permission to use as many Indians as they needed, 'paying them as they must be paid'. But nothing came of this, or of any other attempt during the centuries of colonial rule.

There was a far more serious effort in 1823, soon after Colombia achieved independence from Spanish rule. An enthusiast called José Ignacio 'Pepe' Paris formed a company to drain Guatavita, with sixteen shareholders subscribing \$8,000. He hired an overseer called Ramirez and started cutting a trench on the north-east edge of the circular lake. His drain lowered the lake water; but no treasure was found. He told a friend that the original investment was gone: "I thought it would be sufficient; but unfortunately it has now cost me \$20,000 and there are still 35 feet of water left."

A British naval captain called Charles Stuart Cochrane visited Colombia at this time, and made friends with 'Pepe' Paris. Cochrane amazed the Colombians by demonstrating how a syphon could drain a water tank; but when he reached Guatavita he realized that it was too large to be emptied by this means. Cochrane was struck by the eerie beauty of the lake:

'Picture to yourself a lovely autumnal day on the lakes of Westmoreland,—such had we; not a breath of wind disturbed the glassy surface of the lake, which reflected back the thick woods that studded its shores, rising in tiers on tiers to the height of 127 feet; and above all was seen a calm reflected sky; nought living moved, save a few water-fowl, that gently glided away from us . . .' Cochrane happily settled down among the Colombian Indians living in their cold hut, huddled over the camp fire at night, but with plenty of excellent game to eat. He saw that the trench passed through slate and grey sandstone, so that the water undermined its sides. He arranged for it to be shored. On 25 October 1823 Cochrane reckoned that the trench was ready. 'I determined on opening an embouchure, sufficient to let two square feet of water keep running out during the night. This I did, and retired to rest with the pleasing noise of the roar of the water dashing through the canal, and winding its way to the plains below.' But, by the next morning, the lake was lowered only about six inches and the trench was crumbling. Cochrane ordered hundreds of planks to be cut for more shoring, and then moved on in his

travels. His friend Pepe continued the work, with the dogged determination of a Berrio. Seven successive trenches caved in. Colonel J.P. Hamilton, a British diplomat who visited the lake in 1826, wrote that 'as his design had no chance of success this way, he was advised to dig a subterraneous channel, about 30 feet lower than the bed of the lake, in the same direction he had taken in making the first fissure . . . I heartily wish he may succeed at last; he deserved to possess a good fortune, being a most liberal good-natured man, particularly attentive to foreigners and a great friend of Bolivar's . . .' But another disaster occurred. Indian labourers perished when the tunnel collapsed and 'Pepe' Paris was left as disillusioned and destitute as all his predecessors.

The lure of hidden gold still had powerful attraction. Captain Cochrane quoted someone called Monsieur de la Kier, of the Royal Institute, Paris, who calculated that the lake ought to contain gold and precious stones worth 'one billion one hundred and twenty millions sterling'. Colonel Hamilton was more sceptical. He doubted whether the lake would ever yield enough to repay the cost of draining it. He reasoned that the Muisca, with no gold mines of their own, would never have thrown much treasure into these waters.

The next attempt was made, not on Lake Guatavita, but on Siecha, another round lake on an isolated moorland to the south of the village of Guatavita. Siecha was 220 metres in diameter and at an altitude of 3,673 metres. It was reasoned that Siecha might have been the lake of the Muisca ceremony or that it might contain treasure of the chief of Chia, thrown into it to escape the conquistadores. The first company formed to drain Lake Siecha failed, but the second attempt, in 1856, dug a channel three metres deep and 50 metres long, and managed to lower the lake by a full three metres. Its reward was to find some Muisca objects, including the famous golden figure of the chief and ten attendants on a raft. Liborio Zerda said of this raft: 'In our opinion this piece represents the ceremony of El Dorado.' This success inspired a later attempt on Lake Siecha. In 1870 two men called Crowther and Urdaneta drove a shaft for 187 meters towards the western wall of the lake. They were within a short distance of completing their perforation when, on 9 October 1870, they both died of asphyxiation, from the lack of air in their tunnel and from fumes from the lake mud.

At the end of the century there was renewed interest in Lake Guatavita. Three unmarried ladies who owned the hacienda that contained the sacred lake gave a concession to an entrepreneur to drain Guatavita. In September 1899 this concession passed to an Englishman called Hartley Knowles who floated an enterprise called Contractors Limited, with himself as administrator at a salary of £25 a month. Quantities of equipment were carried up to Guatavita on muleback, including the pride of the English engineers: a steam pump. The work progressed slowly. In 1908 a

Colombian engineer called Hernando de Villa joined Contractors Limited and, with drainage channels and steam pumps, the lake was almost drained. A German traveller called Konrad Beissmanger visited Guatavita in July 1910 and actually took a photograph of the drained lake—a mass of mud, rivulets and pools of water. He found an Englishman called W. Cooper in charge of the operation, and visited a 400-metre tunnel that was being used to drain the lake's mud. It was supported by wooden pit props near its entrance, but otherwise ran through solid limestone. Cooper said that he had worked at Guatavita for eight years. He had a dozen Indian labourers scouring the mud of the lake's floor, prodding with sticks and occasionally finding Muisca objects.

The treasures from Guatavita were sent to London, where Contractors Limited put them on exhibition in August 1911, prior to auction at Sotheby's on 11 December 1911. The sale consisted of 62 lots, 22 of which contained gold and the rest were ceramics or other Muisca artefacts. The finest pieces were pectorals, neck and nose ornaments, a gold snake and a goddess, a golden helmet, pendants and pins. One breastplate weighed over eight ounces and the helmet weighed almost six ounces; otherwise the objects were typical small Muisca pieces weighing between one and two ounces.

The exhibition catalogue revealed that Contractors Limited had had initial capital of £40,000 to which £37,500 of rights and additional issues had been added. It said that 'the Lake was successfully drained dry

in 1904 in spite of many drawbacks and the long revolution [in Colombia]. Great difficulties have been encountered in dealing with the mud and sand at the bottom, a five years' drought causing a great scarcity of water. Work, although slowly, has been going on steadily all the time. A depth of 30 feet has been obtained in the centre and along the ditch to the tunnel, through which all the mud is being washed. Although the surface is now fairly hard and solid, the mud below is in a semiliquid state, and is always pressing in from the sides to the centre. The bottom, perfectly flat when drained, is now cupshaped.' The mud of Guatavita hardened like cement. The First World War brought an end to Contractors Limited. Spring waters refilled the lake. And visionaries remained convinced that the cup-like centre of Guatavita contained the important treasures.

An Irishwoman called Dorothy Warren floated a company to drain Guatavita in 1920; and in 1932 Americans led by a marine diver called Jonessen floundered about in the lake's mud wearing heavy diving suits, and recovered a few more objects. In 1949 Gustavo Jaramillo Sánchez formed a company that designated Guatavita as a mine called El Dorado—to avoid a government prohibition on draining natural lakes. He declared: 'I had a great idea. There is no need to drain the lake to reach its bottom. By mounting a type of dragline called Clamshell everything can be extracted

from the Lake.' An American diver called Timperly arrived in 1953 and scoured the lake with 'a steel ball with movable claws... and the very latest metal-detecting equipment'; but all in vain.

Twelve years later, in 1965, Jaramillo Sánchez was still able to declare: 'I am completely certain that the fabulous treasure of the Chibchas [Muisca] is to be found in the bottom of Lake Guatavita. I am an old miner and I know why I am saying this.' He was convinced that, since precious objects had been found at the edges of the lake, 'it is logical that the veritable Dorado is at its bottom.' His conviction spread. Successful American treasure hunters heard about it through an item in the Wall Street Journal. So, in 1965, Colombian Exploration Inc. was formed in Miami, with one Colombian and four American partners. The formidable diver Kip Wagner, whose Real Eight Corporation had found the treasure of a Spanish plate fleet wrecked off Florida, was involved. The team arrived in Colombia in a blaze of publicity. It declared that the cold of the lake's waters ruled out skin divers: it intended to use strong suction pumps instead. A preliminary reconnaissance began. But the Colombian Institute of Anthropology and the Council of Monuments intervened and declared that inexpert excavation would be illegal: any work on Guatavita could be done only by its own archaeologists. So Lake Guatavita now has a respite, no longer drained, dragged or pumped. But it is unlikely to contain any further Muisca treasure. ■

In legend, each morning the naked king was covered in powdered gold.

