



Learning Museum Program  
Continues with:

# Colombia: Context, Conquest, and Gold

*By Anthony Pfeiffer, project coordinator*

Made possible by a grant from the National Endowment  
for the Humanities, a federal agency

FOR MOST OF HISTORY, ninety-nine percent of Colombia's people were concentrated in 200,000 square miles of the Andes. South of Colombia, the Andean mountain chain — the world's longest and second only to the Himalayas in height — nurtured the world's highest cities with some of the greatest ceremonial centers ever discovered. Peruvian cities, for example, were so vast, their locations so magnificent, and their construction so monumental and technologically advanced that it has been suggested they were the work of visitors from space.

The great civilizations of South America, spread along a 4,500-mile chain of mountains, were human, not otherworldly. They were made possible by a diversity of habitats that are not only astounding in themselves but are made more so by being compressed into such a small area. Within the distance of a mile down a mountainside there might be three distinct ecological zones, each supporting a unique set of flora and fauna. The wealth of plants and animals translates into food for people. When 19th-century travellers went to market in certain parts of the Andes, they were amazed at the variety of foods that could be offered in one small geographic area.

In contrast to tremendous predictability and abundance in some areas, making a living in other locales was a risky business. A localized storm might wipe out a laboriously tended garden. People had to grow many gardens at many levels and were sometimes away from their villages for days at a time to

---

*Set amidst the noble grandeur of the Andes, these prehistoric Inca ruins have a preternatural quality that invites speculation by the space-age traveler. But more realistically, the ruins attest to the extraordinary engineering skills of that ancient civilization.*



work in the lower levels. In these areas people lived above their farmlands in places so cold that early Spanish settlers remarked "even the plants have fur."

Taken as a whole, there is nothing quite like the Andean way of life elsewhere in the world. It is a way of life much more three dimensional than ours. Considered horizontally, each mountain range, each mountain within a range presented unique problems of adaptation as well as opportunities. Considered vertically, up and down a mountain was yet another set of threatening or promising possibilities.

Many great civilizations flourished in the Andes over the millennia. The fabled Inca of Peru are the most renowned and certainly the most far-flung of these civilizations. At one time the Inca empire incorporated most of the Andean chain. No such vast empires originated in Colombia. Archeological evidence suggests that the largest villages had 3,000 to 5,000 inhabitants. These and smaller villages were perhaps loosely organized into kingdoms. In interesting contrast to Colombia's low population density was the wealth of gold to be found there.

In recent times gold prices have fluctuated wildly, seemingly reaching for all time highs. Lust for this precious metal is not new. Christopher Columbus wrote:

*Gold is the most exquisite of all things. Whoever possesses gold can acquire all that he desires in the world. Truly, for gold he can gain entrance for his soul into paradise.*



Pectoral, or chest ornament, of prehistoric Colombia (collection of Museo del Oro, Bogota, Colombia); height: 7¾ in. (20 cm). The goldwork of Colombian artisans was the finest of all South America. The prehistoric Colombians had independently devised every goldsmithing technique known to the Europeans, except electroplating.

### NEH Learning Museum at Field Museum

*The NEH Learning Museum program is a three-year sequence of learning opportunities focused on the Museum's outstanding exhibits and collections and designed to give participants an opportunity to explore a subject in depth.*

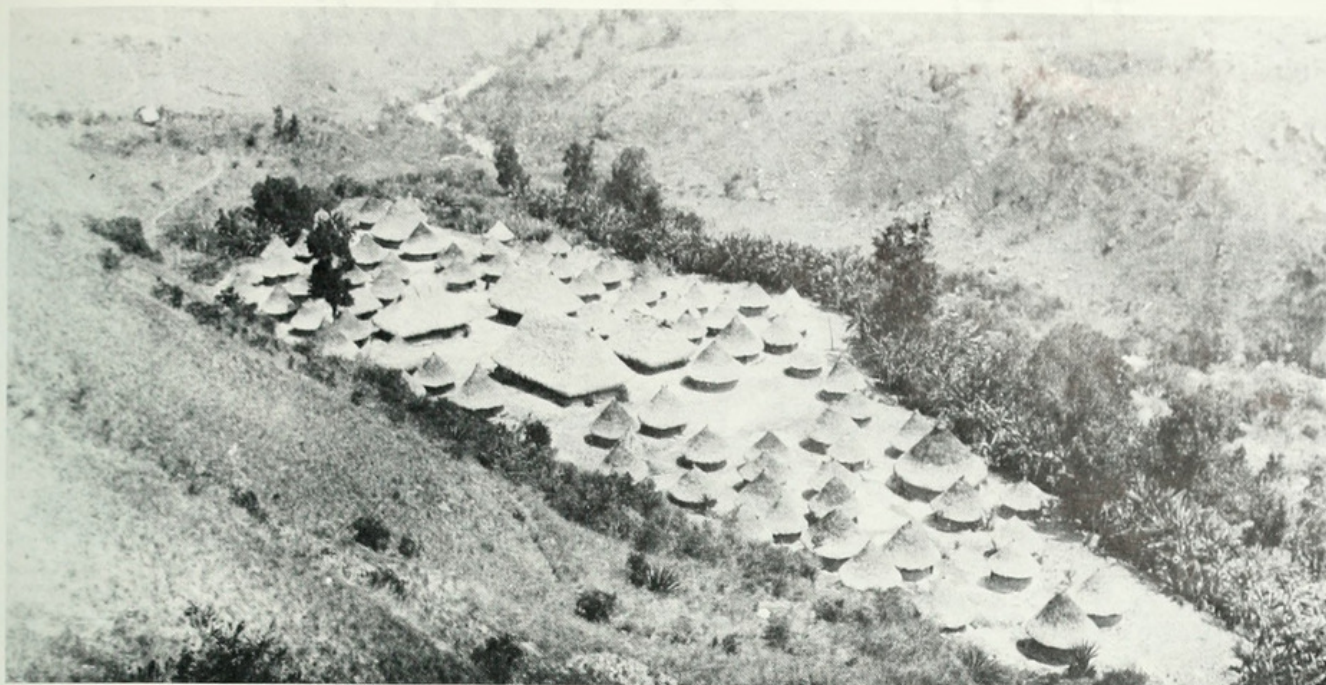
Because of gold, a nameless 10,000-foot peak in Colombia and a lonely lake at its summit shaped the course of world history. The lake is not more than half a mile across, and as round as a wheel. Because of it, Kathleen Romoli wrote in *Colombia: Gateway to South America* (1942): "statesmen halfway round the world sat in conclave; fleets were armed in Cadiz and Plymouth and Lisbon; German bankers and English speculators made strange calculations and investments. Because of it, great captains led desperate adventures; kings gained new empires and simple people lost their gods. This is the lake of El Dorado."

The legend of El Dorado began when a Spanish conquistador was told by an Indian of a mountain place rich in gold. Although no one knows what the Indian actually said, his comment was blown up to mammoth proportions. According to the conquistador, there was a lake in this mountain, where several times a year the chief made sacrifices and offerings, "being naked, but covered from his head to his feet and hands with a sticky resin, and over it much gold in fine powder, so that... it made a second skin." Hoards of gold were said to have been thrown into the lake. Such was the tale that launched a gold rush in Colombia in 1534.

Finding the lake was easy and many attempts were made to drain it. One of the first tries was to carve the lip of the mountain cup containing the lake. Although some water drained from the lake through the wedge-shaped cut, the water level never fell off sufficiently to expose the lake's bottom. Years later, an ambitious team tunnelled beneath the lake and, although the water ran out, the remaining silt dried to the consistency of concrete. In these and other attempts, a few gold pieces were found, enough to tantalize but nothing like the billions of dollars worth expected. For centuries people flocked to Colombia, mesmerized by the dream of a kingdom of gold. If indeed untold golden treasures ever lay under the lake's still waters, they are there still.

Despite the frustrated efforts to coax the lake to yield its purported wealth, the Spanish were successful in looting the rest of the Colombian countryside for its gold artifacts. Thousands of objects were shipped to European lands and the pieces of unexcelled craftsmanship were melted to mere bullion. There was also a human price. Direct battle, slavery, murder, and most insidious and effective killer of all,





The Colombian village of San Miguel, the largest such settlement in its particular region. In former times, groups of such villages may have cooperated in the construction of stonework complexes of platforms, monumental figures, and buildings for communal religious ceremonies.

introduced disease, took their toll.

With "unbelievable daring, unforgivable cruelty, and a kind of superhuman luck," to use Kathleen Romoli's words, the Spanish swept Colombia. Gold mining centers were particularly hard hit. Some agricultural areas—the least prosperous—were virtually untouched. The Paez Indians, who had poor farms, were self-sufficient and lived where the land was steep and cold, as if stranded on a mountain island. They remained isolated for centuries. The Chibcha Indians, in contrast, lived in Colombia's most favorable agricultural lands. They became largely Hispanicized, gradually speaking only Spanish and worshipping as Roman Catholics.

The Colombian survivors of El Dorado gold fever and European imperialism made adjustments in their lifestyles. The Indians adopted Catholic motifs into their traditional wood carvings. European musical structure was introduced and uniquely blended with indigenous rhythms. But in an incredible testament to human resiliency, some aspects of art and music remained staunchly Andean.

In the economic realm, there were dramatic exchanges between European conquerors and native peoples. From South America, the Europeans took the common potato, which was to revolutionize the economies of Central Europe and, much later, of Ireland. Via European transmission from West Africa, South America inherited bananas and coffee, items considered almost stereotypically South American today.

COLOMBIA: CONTEXT, CONQUEST, AND GOLD examines the remarkable story of ancient mountain peoples, conquistador brutality, and the cultures and crafts of Colombia. The course of study begins on April 17 and 24 with two lectures by Field Museum staff, archeologists experienced in the Andes. It continues on May 8 with a screening of the film, "Aguirre, The Wrath of God." Aguirre, leading a Spanish military detachment in search of the mythi-

cal El Dorado, begins his quest on the Amazon River. Overcome by hostile Indians, fever, and starvation, the conquistadors succumb to an uncertain end in impenetrable jungle. The film serves as a vehicle for discussing the Spanish conquest, its motives, and ongoing legacy in South American life. Discussion is led by panelists from Field Museum and other institutions.

As the focus shifts to Colombia, the course offers three lectures by Frank R. Safford, professor of history at Northwestern University. Safford is a specialist in 19th century-Spanish America, with a particular interest in the economic and political history of Colombia. He supplements his lectures with slides of gold and pottery artifacts to illustrate aspects of social organization and to point out distinctive cultural expressions. The three lectures cover the ancient cultures of Colombia, Spanish rule and the mixture of Spanish and indigenous lifestyles, and culminate in a look at how Colombian Indian groups fare today.

Tahuantinsuyo ("Tah-won-tin-soo-yo"), performing Saturday, May 3, is a musical group specializing in folk tunes of South America. Their performance at Field Museum will include dance from the highlands of Peru and Ecuador, supplemented with background slides of life in the Andes.

"COLOMBIA: CONTEXT, CONQUEST, AND GOLD" corresponds with "Gold of El Dorado: The Heritage of Colombia," an exhibit of more than 500 gold objects that miraculously survived the Spanish scourge. This spectacular exhibit, opening at Field Museum on April 25, is the subject of a seminar available only to lecture course participants. The seminar explores the meaning of gold to the people of Colombia. Details on the lecture course and on Tahuantinsuyo's performance are available in the *Spring Courses for Adults* brochure and in April's *Calendar of Events* respectively. All Chicago-area members are on the mailing list for both publications. □





Pfeiffer, Anthony. 1980. "Colombia: Context, Conquest, and Gold." *Field Museum of Natural History bulletin* 51(3), 12–15.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/20812>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/376284>

**Holding Institution**

University Library, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign

**Sponsored by**

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.  
For information contact [dcc@library.uiuc.edu](mailto:dcc@library.uiuc.edu).

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.