

# Guatopo

Gold Mines and the Conquest, Venezuela, 16th Century



Sixto Laya Gimón

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### SUMMARY

In this study, we will take a quick look at the adventures of the first European "gold seekers" in the central northern coastal region of the nascent "Province of Venezuela", in the unexplored territories of the northern coast of South America, known at that time as "Tierra Firme". After the foundation of the city of Caracas on the banks of the Guaire River in July 1567, all the Conquistadors who participated in it, were dedicated to the search for gold mines in the mountains and valleys surrounding the Guatopo Jungle, territory that today occupies the Guatopo National Park.

### Cover Image

Source: De Bry, Theodor (1528 - 1598) *Americae Pars Quarta* 1594.

### Keywords

Guatopo, Gold Mines, Conquest, Province of Venezuela, Tierra Firme, Aboriginal slavery, slave merchants, Royal Crown of Castile, Orituco, Country of the Welser, West Indies

### INTRODUCTION:

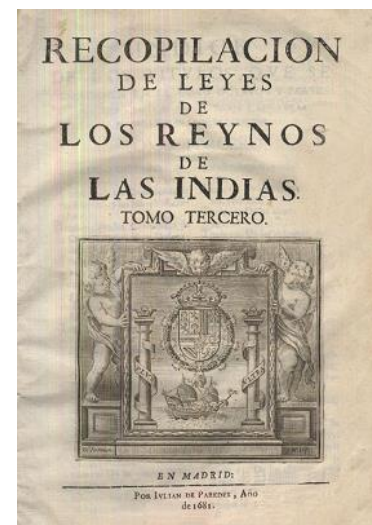
The main objective of the first European invaders was the location and rapid exploitation of gold and silver mines that could be located in the central northern coastal region of the newly founded Province of Venezuela (March 27, 1528). In the chronicles of the conquest and colonization of that territory, it can be clearly observed how gold (Aurum from Latin and Aurós from Greek) became an inciting argument for conquest and discovery.

### BACKGROUND:

The incorporation of the "West Indies" into the Royal Crown of Castile was proclaimed by Charles V, in 1519: "By donation of the Holy Apostolic See and other legitimate titles we are Lord of the West Indies, Islands and Tierra Firma of the Ocean Sea, discovered and to be discovered; and they are incorporated into our Royal Crown of Castile" (Compilation of the Laws of the Kingdoms of the Indies, 1680: Book III, Law I). "Recopilación de las Leyes de los Reynos de las Indias", Madrid 1681.

King Charles I of Spain (1516 -1556), was the first to unite in his person the crowns of Castile, Aragon and Navarre, holding later in 1520, the title of Holy Roman Emperor as "Charles V of Germany", and was nicknamed "Caesar Charles" (Figure 1).

Emperor Charles V by means of a "Capitulation" signed in Madrid on March 27, 1528, leases temporarily the Province of Venezuela to the Welser or Belzares, a family of German bankers from Augsburg, with whom the King had contracted heavy debts. In



payment, they were granted a contract to conquer and colonize the territory of the northwest coast of the current Venezuela, which would be known as the "Country of the Welser" (which the Germans called "Klein-Venedig": Little Venice), becoming one of the first German governorships in America



Figure 1: Portrait of Emperor Charles V (1500-1558), ca 1532. Artist: Amberger, Christoph (ca. 1500-1562). Coat of arms of Charles V.

**Portrait of Emperor Charles V (1500-1558), ca 1532.**

Artist: Amberger, Christoph (ca. 1500-1562). Coat of arms of Charles V.

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Figure 2: "The incorporation of the West Indies into the Royal Crown of Castile, 1519". Double-page map of Caribbean Sea, the north of South America ("Tierra Firme"), Florida, Greater and Lesser Antilles. Source: Girolamo Benzoni, "Historia del Mondo Nuovo"; Author: De Bry, Theodor. Frankfurt, Ioannis Feyrabend, 1594. Series: Great voyages, pt. 4.



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Figure 3: Creation of the Province of Venezuela (1528) Source: Sixto Laya Gimón; Own elaboration.

### Province of Venezuela - 1528

The Province of Venezuela was thus constituted, whose western limit was located at Cabo de la Vela in the Guajira peninsula, and to the East as far as Maracapaná (near today's Barcelona), [...] "with all the islands that are on the said coast, including those entrusted to and under the charge of the factor Juan de Ampies"... Coinciding with the arrival in Santa Ana de Coro (February 24, 1529), of the conquering expedition that had departed from Hispaniola, commanded by the German Ambrosio Alfinger (in German Ambrosius Ehinger, 1500-1533), is when the unbridled search for the precious gold ore began throughout the territory of the newly created Province of Venezuela (1528), (Figure 3). Alfinger had the honor of being its first Governor, representing the Welser or Belzares. From the beginning it was very clear that the motivation of the Welser and therefore of Alfinger was none other than to trade and gather wealth. In the chronicles of the conquest, the governor Ambrosio Alfinger is presented as a fierce predator of the aborigines of the New World, characterized by an excessive violence against them, and to whom snatched his garments and gold amulets, eventually gathering in this way, a booty with an estimated value of 90,000 pesos of gold.



Armada Welser in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Spain, before leaving for Venezuela. Author: Hieronymus Köler, ca. 1560.

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Figure 4: Armada Welser in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Spain, by Hieronymus Köler, ca. 1560.

#### German Governors of the Province of Venezuela

As he did not manage to discover any mine in his government, he decided to appeal to a quick source of income, starting the horrendous "manhunt" of the natives, capturing them to later sell them as "slaves" on the West Indian island of Hispaniola, where they would be subjected to forced labor in the gold mines that the Spaniards exploited in the Cibao Valley and other regions.

On that island, the pre-Columbian indigenous population had been brutally decimated as a result of oppression, forced labor, hunger, disease and mass murder, so that of the 400,000 "Taino" Indians who originally inhabited the island in 1492, only about 50,000 existed by 1508, and by 1535, only 6,000 were alive. Consequently, the demand for slave labor for the exploitation of these mines awakened the greed of the German Governors of the Province of Venezuela, who progressively transformed Santa Ana de Coro into the main center for the collection of indigenous slaves, who would later be sold to slave merchants from Hispaniola and San Juan (Puerto Rico), thus creating the greatest escalation in the extermination of the native population.

Between 1529 and 1556, the German governors organized innumerable expeditions in search of the precious mineral. Leaving from Santa Ana de Coro, they went to the west, south and east of the province, from where they brought gold taken from the natives, but in no case did they leave any record of the localities, nor of the gold deposits where this mineral came from.

However, years later, some gold was found in the area of Barquisimeto, El Tocuyo, Valencia and the port of Borburata. But it was not until the decade of 1560, when the news of mines of the coveted metal spread, in the territory occupied by the ethnic group of the hardened Caracas Indians, in the central-north-coastal region of the Province of Venezuela, as we will see later on.

#### **Incorporation to the Spanish Crown of all the mines of Tierra Firme.**

In order to regularize the extraction of precious minerals in all the Hispanic colonies in America, King Don Felipe II by means of the Valladolid Ordinance of January 10, 1559, expressly and solemnly established the incorporation to the Crown of all the mines of gold, silver and quicksilver existing in Tierra Firme de las Indias del Mar Océano, thus: "First we reduce, summarize and incorporate in Us and in our Crown and Patrimony all the mines of gold and silver and quicksilver, of these, our Kingdoms, in any parts and places that are and are found, Realengos, or of Lordship or Abadengo, now be it in the public, council or in inheritances and parts and soils of individuals" (Chapter I. Law 4a, Title I, Book 6) (Amorer, E. 1991).

#### **The exploitation of the mines**

The conquering enterprise of Tierra Firme was characterized as a process where the Spanish conqueror subdued the natives by force of arms and "reduced" them to an opprobrious slavery. From the beginning, the natives were violently pressured to reveal the origin of the gold in their ornaments, and they proceeded to loot the precious metal (the so-called "RESCATES"). Through the license granted by Her Catholic Majesty Queen Isabella in the year 1503 to "reduce" the Carib Indians, open authorization was given to hunt ("manhunt") with sword and arquebus as many Indians as the ambitious slavers wanted; who cared very little about the affiliation of the captives, since for them every Indian was a cannibal, that is, anthropophagous. This became the accusation to justify extermination, and in this inhuman way thousands of Indians were murdered at the hands of slave traders.

#### **Castilla del Oro Governorate since 1514**

Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478-1557), well-known historian and chronicler, author of the "Historia general y natural de las Indias, islas y Tierra Firme del mar Océano" (1535), in his pages shows us a concise vision of how gold became an inciting argument for the conquest and discoveries. He traveled to the Indies in 1513 with the expedition of Pedrarias Dávila (Pedro Arias Dávila 1440 – 1531), governor of "Castilla del Oro" (Castilla del Oro from 1514 to 1526; a territory that included the current countries of Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama and the northern part of Colombia). From the point of view of a meticulous observer of the nature and customs of the New World, he revealed himself as a firm defender of the conquistadors and a bitter enemy of the indigenous people (Figure 5).

#### **Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478-1557)**

"This particularity of mines is something much to note, and I can speak on them better than another, because for twelve years in the Tierra Firme I have served as overseer of the gold smelters and overseer of mines (in Castilla del Oro), to the Catholic King Don Fernando, who is in glory, and to your majesty, and for this cause I have seen very well how gold is extracted and mines are worked.... and I have had gold extracted for myself with my Indians and slaves" ... (Figure 5)

"These mines in the savannah or found on land must always be sought near a river or stream or stream of water or raft or fountain, where gold can be worked, and they put certain Indians to dig the land, which they call escopetar; and once dug they swell earthen pans, and other Indians are in charge of carrying the said pans to where the water is, where this land is to be washed".... "and it should be noted that for a pair of Indians who wash, two people are needed to serve each one of them, and two others who dig and break and dig, and swell the said service pans, because that is what the pans in which earth is taken to the washers are called, service pans... So that a pan is, at least in all that is said, five people ordinarily." (Fernández De Oviedo, Gonzalo 1535).



Figure 5: Engravings by Theodor de Bry (1528-1598). *Americae Pars Quarta* 1594.

**Aboriginal slaves forced labor in gold mines, 16th century.**

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### Fatal consequences

Before that inhuman performance of the Hispanic conquerors in the Indies, Father Bartolomé de las Casas, advocated before the Crown of Spain, so that the necessary measures would be taken and thus manage to extirpate and remedy so many evils, so many evils and betrayals.... "The reason why so many Christians have died and destroyed so many and such an infinite number of souls has been only to have gold as their ultimate goal and to fill themselves with riches in a very short period of time and rise to very high states and without proportion to their persons...". This is how Father Bartolomé de Las Casas denounced it in his work "Brevísima relación de la destrucción de Indias", Sevilla 1552 (Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies - Seville 1552), at the same time that he compared the exploitation of pearls in the island of Cubagua (Venezuela), with the exploitation of gold mines in Tierra Firme:

"The tyranny that the Spaniards exercise against the Indians in the extraction or fishing of pearls is one of the cruel and condemned things that can be in the world; there is no infernal and desperate life in this century that can be compared to it, although that of extracting gold in the mines is in its kind extremely serious and terrible" (Casas, Bartolomé de las 1552).

### Gold Production in Venezuela - 16th and 17th centuries

The researcher Earl J. Hamilton, in his work "The American Treasure and the Price Revolution in Spain, 1501-1659", initially published in 1934, describes that in the XVI and XVII centuries, from 1503 and during the following 160 years, 185,000 kilos of gold and 16 million kilos of silver (1503 and 1660) arrived in Spain, at the port of San Lúcar de Barrameda, from colonial America (Hamilton, Earl J. 1934; 2000).

In the Province of Venezuela, the production of gold was relatively low if we compare it with the other colonies in the West Indies. It is only in the middle of the 16th century with the discovery of the gold mines of San Felipe de Buria (today in the State of Yaracuy), when the extraction of gold formally began in Venezuelan territory, providing the first firm basis for the development of the Colony. Although of scarce yield, this discovery originated the foundation of the city of Nueva Segovia, today Barquisimeto (1552), and other towns such as Valencia and Borburata. That same year, Governor Juan de Villegas discovered another vein of gold in the site of San Pedro, as well as it is also mentioned to have found gold samples in the Quebrada de Cocorote.

*"In 1551, Damian del Barrio, by order of Governor Juan de Villegas, discovered the gold mine of Buria, in the mountains of Nirgua and the savannas of Londres, which gave rise to the foundation of Barquisimeto and the town of Nirgua... In 1552, Governor Villegas himself discovered another mine on the hill of San Pedro, in the same mountain range near the river that today is called San Pedrito"* (Memoria de la Dirección General de Estadística del Ministerio de Fomento of 1873; p. 43). Both the Buría and San Pedro mines were exploited for a short time and then abandoned due to the hostility of the Indians and finally because of the exhaustion of the deposits. In the same period, towards the second half of the XVI century, some gold was obtained in the area of El Tocuyo, Valencia and the port of Borburata (1). But it was not until the decade of 1560, when the news of mines of the coveted metal was spread in the territory occupied by the Caracas Indians, in the central-north-coastal region of the Province of Venezuela. (Oviedo Y Baños, J.1992 [1723]; Castillo Lara, L. 1977; Nectario María, H. 1950; López, Víctor 1981; Urbani, F. 2018).

### Santiago de León de Caracas (1567)

In 1560, the mestizo Captain Francisco Fajardo (1530-1564) discovered a gold mine in the territory of the Teques Indians, as a result of a series of exploratory trips from his native island of Margarita, which led him to discover the coveted valley of the Guaire River, which he named "Valle de San Francisco", the future seat of the city of Santiago de León de Caracas (Figure 6).

As a result of his insistence and tenacity, he discovered the mines in the lands of the Teques Indians, in the sector "altos de las Lagunetas", sending to the city of Santa Ana de Coro some samples of the mineral to the Governor and Captain General of the Province of Venezuela, Don Pablo Collado. Crass mistake, since it cost him the general envy of all the Spanish conquerors and of the Governor himself, who revoked him the titles and powers previously granted, naming to substitute him in the prosecution of this conquest Pedro Miranda, who once obtained some samples of gold from the mines discovered by Fajardo in the site of the Lagunetas, he goes to El



Collado (future Caraballeda), where he captures him and sends him to the port of Borburata and from there to Tocuyo, where Governor Collado sets him free, and to make amends for the mistreatment he had suffered, he appoints him Major Justice of the Villa of El Collado, where he returns very unhappy. Convinced the governor Collado of the importance of the province of Caracas by the relation that Pedro de Miranda made him of the wealth of its gold mines, of the salubrity of its lands, and of the great number of Indians that populated it, decides to send (1561), the prestigious captain Juan Rodríguez Suárez to continue with the conquest and settlement of the valley of San Francisco, recommending him especially to establish the exploitation of the "real de minas" discovered by Fajardo (near Carrizal, Miranda) in the territory of the brave Teques Indians.



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Figure 6: North-central coastal region of the Republic of Venezuela, with the relative location of the Guatopo sector in the Serranía del Interior. Source: Sixto Laya Gimón, own elaboration.

### The courageous cacique Guaicaipuro

The brave cacique Guaicaipuro in alliance with the other caciques of the coastal region (including among them the most powerful: Catia, Guaimacuare, Guaicamacuto and Naignatá; while Pariata, Curucutí, Guaracarumbo, Maiquetía, Guarauguta, Carapaica, among others, would have less territory, fewer men and, therefore, less power) tried to prevent the penetration of the Spaniards and the exploitation of the gold mines (Figure 7). Rodríguez Suárez allied with Captain Francisco Fajardo and defeated the Cacique de Los Teques in the battles of San Pedro and La Quebrada. But

finally, Guaicaipuro and his ally Paramaconi defeat him and kill him (1561), in the siege of Las Lagunetas (Miranda State). Guaicaipuro became the main and central figure in the uprising of all the native tribes of the province of Caracas, and managed to unite them all under his command (Nectario María, H. 1980).



**Central northern coastal region of the Province of Venezuela 1567.  
Aboriginal Population Distribution.**

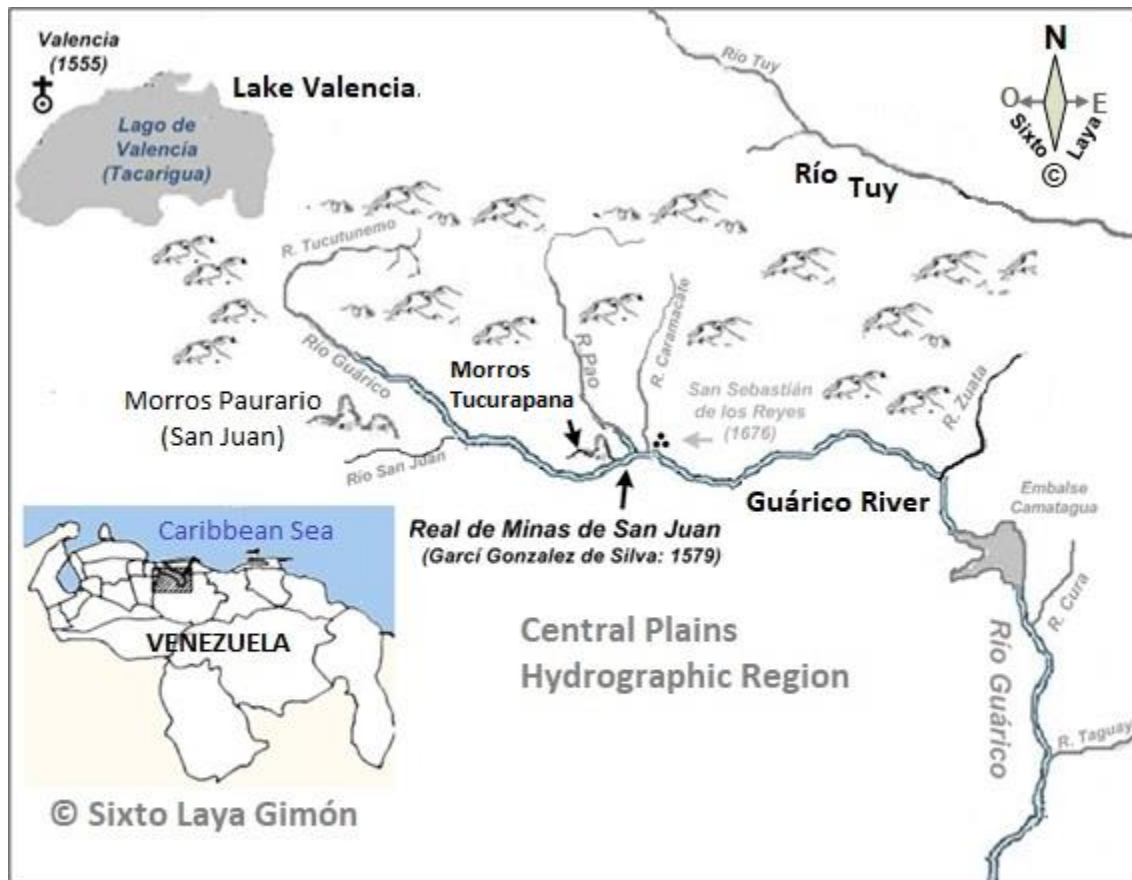
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Figure 7: Aboriginal population distribution in the Central-North region of the Province of Venezuela 1567. Author: Sixto Laya Gimón 2014.

**Central northern coastal region of the Province of Venezuela 1567.**

The attempts to conquer the valley of the Caracas Indians (Valle del Miedo, as it was also known), crashed for many years due to the strong resistance of the aborigines. It was only in the middle of 1567, when Captain Diego de Losada, by order of the governor of the province, Pedro Ponce de León (Period: 1566-1569), cautiously undertook the conquest and pacification of the Caracas valley. He manages to (re)found the city of Santiago de León de Caracas on July 25, 1567, the day of Santiago, in the same place where initially Francisco Fajardo had founded the "town" of San

Francisco (1560), and later Juan Rodríguez Suárez the "Villa de San Francisco" (1561). After the death of Losada (Borburata, 1569), some conquistadors (Garci González de Silva among others) continued the exploitation of the "real de minas" discovered by Fajardo. In 1575 Captain Spanish Gabriel (or Gustavo) de Ávila found the mine again and called it "Nuestra Señora", but a few years later it was "abandoned and forgotten" (around 1580).



### Central Plains Hydrographic Region - Guárico River - Lake Valencia. Venezuela

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Figure 8: Real de Minas de San Juan (Paurario), and Morros Tucurapana, Guárico River, Venezuela 1579. Source: Sixto Laya Gimón, own elaboration.

### Real de Minas San Juan -Paurario-, and Morros Tucurapana, Guárico river 1579

The tireless search for gold-bearing outcrops by the Spanish conquistadors continued feverishly throughout the central-coastal region of the province.

With the establishment of a "Real de minas" by the famous captain Garci Gonzalez de Silva in 1579 on the banks of the Guarico River, hopes of obtaining gold were raised (Figure 8).

[...] the Real de minas de San Juan, which the said Garci González populated when he discovered the said mines. ... in the region and slopes of the said Guárico River. ....que is in the joints that

make this said river of Guárico and that of the Pao... that is where the said Captain Garci González had lodged his people when he went to the conquest of the Cumanagotos... located in the proximities of... "Morro e Peñoles that the Christians call the Morros del Guárico" (Tucurapana of the Carib Indians). (Archivo General de Indias. Santo Domingo 207. Transfers National Academy of History. No. 109- V- II; p. 363 and 367. In: Castillo Lara, Lucas G. 1984: pp. 19 and 161).

#### **Expedition commanded by Captain González de Silva, 1579.**

That famous expedition to the east, commanded by Captain Garci González de Silva, was destined to conquer the untamed province of the Cumanagotos. Following the mandate of Governor Juan de Pimentel, the expedition left Santiago de León on April 6, 1579, heading for the valleys of Aragua, to then continue along the old "route of the plains", following the Guárico riverbed, then marching parallel to the southern foothills of the Serranía del Interior, until reaching the coast where the Unare River flows into the Caribbean Sea (Figure 8). He had left with 130 Spanish soldiers. González de Silva decided to take that road... "fleeing from the Cumanagotos having news of his entrance, he left the coastal path, which was the best known, and forming a half circle for the valleys of Aragua, he crossed through the plains" (Oviedo y Baños, José de 1992: 302). Necessarily, Gonzalez de Silva and his people must have crossed the Orituco valley, but unfortunately there is no reference to this.

#### **Foundation of San Juan de la Paz (1584) and San Sebastián de los Reyes (1585).**

Having as fundamental objective to assure a permanent communication with the eastern region (Cumaná), and to establish the control and dominion of the region to the South of Caracas, the Governor Don Luis de Rojas, decided to commission the captain Sebastián Díaz de Alfaro for the "pacification and conquest" of the Indian nations of the south zone of the capital.

South of Santiago de León, only the valley of Salamanca (Valles del Tuy Medio) was known. However, beyond the Interior mountain range (hydrographic limit between the basins of the Caribbean Sea and the Orinoco River), the immense and unknown region of the central plains, which extended south to the banks of the Orinoco (Uyapari), remained unexplored.

Governor Don Luis de Rojas informed the King of his determination, in a letter dated October 27, 1584, in Santiago de Leon: "I have sent Captain Sebastian Diaz with sixty well dressed men to look for a comfortable place to build a town, so that the town of Cumana can be communicated with this one, from where the necessary food of corn and meat can be provided; he is a man who was found in populating this city and has experience in everything" [Archivo General de Indias. Santo Domingo, 193. Branch 1. Transfers National Academy of History. Volume 132. vit. 2, p 128].

Captain Diaz de Alfaro and his expedition arrived at the "Sabanetas de Ocumare", where they established a "ranchería" in a strategic site on the right bank of the Tuy River, where very later the current population of Ocumare del Tuy would settle. On October 17 of that same year, they left for the "peaceful" conquest of the provinces of the Quiriquires, Tomusas and Aruacos. They continued their expedition following the course of the Tuy River, downstream, and according to the account of the Scribe of the expedition Alonso Garcia de Pineda, Captain Diaz Alfaro "ran the said provinces and pointed them out, and on the banks of the river they call Tuy he populated a city, which he named San Juan de la Paz" [Archivo General de India. Escribanía de Cámara. File 658-A. Ramo 4. Pieza Primera, f. 33]. The exact site of its primitive location has not been

determined so far, we only have reference that it was founded on the banks of the Tuy, as stated by the chronicler Oviedo y Baños (in his work written in 1705 and initially published in 1723).



#### Foundation of San Sebastián de los Reyes, Venezuela (1585).

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Figure 9: Foundation of San Sebastián de los Reyes (06/January/1585). Author: Sixto Laya Gimón 2014. own elaboration.

***"Captain Díaz de Alfaro founded on the banks of the Tuy River (four leagues below where it joins its waters with the Guaire) the city of San Juan de la Paz."*** (Oviedo y Baños, José 1992 [1723]).

Let us remember that, as previously mentioned, the expedition left the "Sabanetas de Ocumare" on October 17 of that year, following the course of the Tuy, which after receiving the waters of the Guaire River on its left bank, enters a kind of mountainous narrowing, enters a kind of mountainous narrowing where the Tuy Valleys end and the Barlovento Valleys open up, right in the territory dominated by the Tomusas Indians, who by that time lived dispersed in the jungles of the Barloventeñas and in the intricate mountains of the eastern section of the Interior Mountain Range.

Regarding the original seat of San Juan, the researcher Castillo Lara affirms: the four leagues indicated by Oviedo would be near the current site of Aragüita. It is even possible that the location was a little further down, always on the banks of the Tuy. (Castillo Lara, L. 1984: pp. 32- 33).

The author Telasco Mac Pherson, in his work published in 1891, is of the same opinion: "the town of San Juan de la Paz was probably founded on the site now occupied by Aragüita by Sebastián Díaz Alfaro, on the banks of the Tuy River and the gold mines that enriched San Juan were discovered in the vicinity" (Telasco Mac Pherson, 1891).

"[...] His Mercy populated in the name of His Majesty on the said bank of the Tuy, Province of the Tomusas, a city which he named "San Juan de la Paz" [...] [Act of the Foundation of San Sebastián de los Reyes (Copy issued on 07-08-1762: Archivo General de la Nación. Miscellaneous. Volume XXXVI, Years 1762 to 1764, No. 10. ff. 163 to 175)].

The date of its foundation has not been explicitly fixed in the documents known until now, but having the certainty that the expedition had left the Sabanetas de Ocumare on October 17 of that same year, the researcher Castillo Lara, proposes that the foundation could be fixed for the end of November or beginning of December of 1584 (Castillo Lara, Lucas 1984: Volume I; p. 32). Once the site and place where the city would be populated had been chosen, the ceremony that His Majesty's Captains used to do took place, and he went on to populate the city, assigning it about thirty neighbors, that is, almost half of those he had taken on the expedition. Then he appointed the Aldermen and Mayors, and according to the powers and faculties he had, he distributed plots of land to the neighbors and distributed the "encomiendas de los naturales" of the region.

#### **Apa and Carapa: gold mines in Guatopo 1584**

The primary objective of the colonizing expedition advanced by Captain Diaz de Alfaro had a clear mining impulse from its beginnings. The greed to obtain gold and the desire for profit always present in all Spanish conquerors, turned the "entrance" to the province of the Quiriquires, Aruacos and Tomusas, into a purely economic enterprise. The expectations of finding alluvial gold in the beds of the rivers and streams of that province were supported by the previous discoveries in the territory of Los Teques, made by Francisco Fajardo in 1560, and the establishment of a Royal gold mine by Garci González de Silva in 1579 on the banks of the middle course of the Guárico River, at the level of its confluence with the Pao River (Figure 8).

In his eagerness to find gold deposits, Diaz de Alfaro went into the surrounding mountains, where some indigenous people had given him news of the existence of alluvial gold in the beds of some rivers and streams of that intricate surrounding jungle, where they found it in the form of nuggets. Thus declared his expedition companion Mateo de Laya Mojica, "Having left the land and the natives of it in the name of His Royal Majesty, the said Captain by his own person went out to discover mines, occupying some time in discovering them until he discovered them very rich, from which he extracted a very great quantity of gold, of which he took as a sample to His Majesty and his Royal Council in pieces of sixty and one hundred pesos and one hundred and fifty of fine gold each, which Simon de Bolivar carried in the name of this city and went to ask His Majesty for merits, which if today they were to be worked, a great quantity of gold would be extracted

because they promise great wealth" [Archivo General de Indias. Chamber Clerk's Office. Legajo 658- A, Ramo 4, f. 38], In: Castillo Lara, Lucas 1984; 1977).

In the vicinity of the Apa and Carapa ravines (tributaries of the Tuy River), Captain Díaz de Alfaro discovered the mines of the same name, which gave much fame and renown to San Juan in its beginnings, "since the mines of Apa and Carapa were discovered in its jurisdiction with such opulent wealth, that in the first two months of their benefit, forty thousand (40,000) castellanos of gold of twenty-three carats were extracted" (Oviedo y Baños, José 1992: 314; Landaeta Rosales, Manuel 1901).

### Abandonment of San Juan de la Paz and its gold mines

The magnetic influx of the fine gold-bearing mineral discovered in the vicinity of the Apa and Carapa gorges was short-lived, and a few months after starting to work it, the production of the mines stopped. There must have been several reasons why the European conquerors' desire for easy wealth and immediate profit dissipated in such a short time and they abandoned such fruitful mines, given the registered production of fine gold obtained from them.



Taguaza Dam, Taguaza River. The Author on the trail of the Apa and Carapa Mines in the Taguaza River hydrographic basin, Aragüita; Miranda State, Venezuela. Source: Sixto Laya Gimón: 2011.02.15

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Figure 10: Taguaza Dam, Taguaza River hydrographic basin, Aragüita; Miranda State, Venezuela. Source: Laya Gimón, S. 2014; 2017.

One of these versions is that of the chronicler José Luís de Cisneros (1764) [...] "At one time in the jurisdiction of San Sebastián de los Reyes, distant from this city, about twenty-five leagues, in two small hills, called Apa and Carapa, mines were worked, of whose precious metal, and of superior quality, a monstrance was made, and different jewels, which still remain in the city itself, The benefit of which stopped because of the misfortune that befell the laborers of those mines, who

were invaded by the barbarian Indians of the Tomusos nation, who slaughtered them all and put those who promoted this idea in such fear that, forgetting their usefulness, because of the fear of the Indians, they gave up the enterprise." (Cisneros, José de 1981 [1764], pp. 79- 80).

#### **Quiriquires, Tomusas and Guaiquerías: They are a brave and fierce people**

The repeated invasions of the Tomusos, and the deaths of Spanish people at the hands of these "brave and fierce people" were the fundamental reasons for the abandonment of these mines. This is how the renowned conquistador Alonso Andrea de Ledesma related it in a testimonial information in 1589: "... the Quiriquires, Tomusas and Guaiquerías Indians, who are entrusted to particular neighbors of this city and San Sebastián de los Reyes, very close to this city, do not respond to the call of their encomenderos and are still rebellious, because they are a brave and fierce people, inhuman, traitors, such that every day they offend any Christian they find convenient to attack, with such shamelessness that not twenty days ago this witness and other people he had with him extracting gold in the mines of San Sebastian, up to seventy Tomusas Indians came out to them and treacherously attacked him with many arrows, and in the defense this witness lost and was killed by a black man and two ladino Indians, and they ate the black man roasted in barbecue" [Archivo General de Indias. General Indifferent 3.088-C. Transfers National Academy of History. Volume 74. Showcase 1. p. 143. In: Castillo Lara, Lucas 1984: Vol. I; p. 52].

For the chronicler José de Oviedo y Baños (1723), the reasons were different: "...that happiness was a flash of lightning that was extinguished when it began to shine, because it was recognized later that the temperament was very sick, due to the many dampnesses of the land.... to which was added the fact that the waters were so frequent, that a whole month used to pass without seeing the sun, in a continuous rain, the neighbors began to abandon it; and putting health before the convenience they could acquire in the work of the mines, they abandoned it with such haste, that before two years had passed it was completely depopulated, losing with the passing of time even the memory of the place where the gold was extracted" (Oviedo y Baños, J. 1992: 314).

Also Telasco Mac Pherson (1891), in his aforementioned work, stated that, "Near these hills are the abandoned mines at the headwaters of the Arenilla River, between Apa and Carapa [...] that due to the harsh climate and the fevers that affected the miners were abandoned." (Mac Pherson, Telasco 1891).

In this regard, Dr. Rodrigo Infante, a medical doctor and writer from Orituco, writes: "It is possible, I say, that the hyperthermia that defeated the mine workers could have been jungle yellow fever or, with less probability, malaria" (In: López Garcés, Carlos 1998).

The aragüeño researcher Castillo Lara, concludes: "the cause of this abandonment must have been the unhealthiness of the site, the diseases, the wildness of the place, the jungle, the inhospitable climate and also the lurking danger of some hostile natives". At the same time he refers that, once the mines were discovered by Captain Diaz de Alfaro, and being present in the same, he suffered a feverish illness, as related by the Scribe Alonso Garcia Pineda: "Being the said Captain Sebastian Diaz de Alfaro in the said ravine of Apa personally, he got a certain feverish illness that forced him to abandon it in order not to lose his life, with respect to the fact that the land was fragrant with mountains and sick, and he came to this city". [Archivo General de Indias. Chamber Clerk's Office. File 658-A. Ramo 4. f. 33]- In: Castillo Lara, Lucas (1984): Volume I; p. 50; Castillo Lara, Lucas 1977: 297; Castillo Lara, Lucas 1981: 59-61).





### The City of Gold in Orituco: San Sebastián de los Reyes 1585

*Guatopo, Gold Mines and the Conquest, Venezuela, 16th Century - Sixto Laya Gimón*

Figure 11: Gold Mines of San Sebastián de los Reyes, seat of Curabe (1585). Source: Sixto Laya Gimón, own elaboration.

San Sebastián de Los Reyes, the city of gold in Orituco 1585.

#### Act of Foundation of San Sebastián de los Reyes 1585

"Your Mercy ... Captain Sebastián Díaz de Alfaro, went to these said Provinces of the Quiriquires and Aruacos to populate the other city, in which he went about looking for a comfortable, good and well prepared place in which to found it, that because this is now, at the present time, the best site and place that could be discovered and found to populate the said city, and for it to go forward, and because it is close to the natives of these Provinces; therefore, that in the name of the Royal Majesty of King Don Felipe II, Our Lord, he populated and populated in the said name and in this said seat a city, to which he named the city of San Sebastian de los Reyes and to the invocation of the Church Santa Maria de los Reyes, for being populated on the day of the feast of the Kings"... (Act of the Foundation of San Sebastián de los Reyes, copy issued on 07-08-1762, Archivo General de la Nación. Miscellaneous. Volume XXXVI, Years 1762 to 1764, Nº 10. ff. 163 to 175).

Don Adolfo A. Machado (01-09-1855; †: 01-07-1903) in his work *Apuntaciones para la Historia de Altagracia de Orituco*, written between 1875 and 1899, his native town, when referring to the

origins of the city of San Sebastian de los Reyes (1585) passionately affirms that it was the "City of Gold in Orituco" alleging two reasons to justify that famous phrase. Firstly because it was the first town built by the Spanish conquerors on Orituco soil, and also because ... "Not for simple pleasure or for the glory of being the founder of towns, Díaz Alfaro came to build the primitive San Sebastián de los Reyes on Orituco soil, ... but attracted by the preliminary works of exploitation of the gold mines of Captain José Silva, in the opening of the Quebrada de Mota, which has its source in the Cerro El Diamante; and the gold mines discovered by Chacón on the right bank of the Quebrada las Minas or Apamate, northeast of Altagracia de Orituco" (In the grounds of the current Natural Monument "Morros de Macaira", Figure 11).



### Foundation of San Sebastián de los Reyes 06/January/1585

*Guatopo, Gold Mines and the Conquest, Venezuela, 16th Century - Sixto Laya Gimón*

Figure 12: The origins of the city of San Sebastian de los Reyes (1585). Source: Sixto Laya Gimón, own elaboration.



**Gold Mines in the Guatopo Jungle, San Sebastian de los Reyes  
Province of Venezuela 1585**

*Guatopo, Gold Mines and the Conquest, Venezuela, 16th Century - Sixto Laya Gimón*

Figure 13: San Sebastián de Los Reyes, the City of gold in Orituco 1585. Source: Sixto Laya Gimón, own elaboration.

Machado supposes that the exploitation of the mines discovered by both Captain José Silva and Captain Chacón must have taken place in "earlier times" even before the discoveries of the mines of Apa and Carapa in the jungle surrounding the city on the banks of the Tuy, San Juan de la Paz (1584).

In support of Machado's hypothesis, we could argue that Captain Sebastián Díaz de Alfaro, once the incipient city was settled, "some four leagues below the mouth of the Guaire in the Tuy" (in the vicinity of the present town of Aragüita); he personally entered the surrounding jungle and discovered the famous mines of Apa and Carapa. This must have occurred in the final days of 1584; and in spite of the fruitful yields of these mines, the founding captain orders and organizes quickly the continuation of his colonizing plan, returning with part of his people to the Sabanetas de Ocumare, from where without many hesitations he sets off very successfully through the Lagartijo river, upstream, crossing the Fila Maestra, to fall into the valley of Buena Vista or Curabe, "a small valley of about one square kilometer, at the mouth of a creek (Curabe) in the Quere, tributary of the Memo River"; place selected to found the primitive San Sebastián de los Reyes on January 6, 1585 (Machado, A: 1961, p 20).

The precise orientation and mobilization of Diaz Alfaro and his people in those rugged mountains, denote a previous recognition of the area by Spanish explorers, as well as the discovery of gold deposits in the Orituco made prior to the founding of San Juan de la Paz (late 1584), by the aforementioned captains Silva and Chacon; As suggested by the historian of Orituco, Don Adolfo Machado, who does not doubt for a moment the existence of alluvial gold in remote times, before the foundation of the towns of Orituco.



Native gold found attached to minerals such as quartz, alluvial gold and gold nuggets.

### CONCLUSIONS:

The search for gold-bearing outcrops became an inciting argument for the rapid conquest and colonization of both the Tuy and Orituco river valleys, using the indigenous slave labor force, subdued by the force of arms of the Spanish conquerors, so that with their hard work they could open roads, sap and tunnels, scattered throughout those rugged mountains and along the riverbeds of the ravines, streams and rivers in the Orituco river.

The magnetic influx of the fine gold ore discovered in the vicinity of the Apa and Carapa streams (tributaries of the Tuy), and the Silva and Chacón mines in the Orituco Valley was short-lived. The resistance of the Quiriquires and Tomusas tribes (ancestral owners of the Tuy), led to the failure of the conquering adventure and the exploitation of the gold of Apa and Carapa, hindering the support of San Juan de la Paz, which was assaulted and besieged by the fierce Carib warriors, causing the abandonment of the city, so many of its neighbors returned to Santiago de León and some others joined the settlers of San Sebastián in its primitive seat of Curabe (1585).

Faced with these new circumstances, the Spanish conquistadors focused their colonization efforts on the establishment of cattle herds. It is worth noting that despite the discovery of the fertile and wooded Orituco Valley, with its year-round streams of crystal clear water, the new settlers of the valley did not arrive with the intention of cultivating the land. Hence, almost from the beginning, cattle raising became the main source of life for the city, the main source of production, in spite of the promising agricultural perspective offered by the valleys and fertile plains of the river and its tributaries. © Sixto Laya Gimón 2021

### NOTES

1) The "Nuestra Señora" Gold Mine in the Chirgua River Valley (1551). In 1551, the Spanish conquistador Juan de Villegas (Juan Ruiz de Villegas y Maldonado, ca.1509 - 1553), explored the headwaters of the Pao River, in the current states of Cojedes and Carabobo, discovering gold in the valley of the Chirgua River. The headwaters of the Pao River basin are precisely the Chirgua and El Torito rivers. "Thus he arrived at the Pao River in which region he settled the camp and in a nearby ravine discovered rich gold mines, which he named Nuestra Señora. These mines were 6 or

7 leagues from Acarigua and 14 from Borburata" (Castillo Lara 1977). Villegas declared to have found "very fine and granulated gold, that in 6 days the black Francisco [slave], alone, extracted 12 pesos of gold" (Nectario María 1950; Castillo Lara 1977).

These were the first mines exploited in Venezuela, which in some documents are called "Minas de Borburata", since this was the closest and most important town and port at that time. It must have been located at an intermediate point between the town of El Pao and Valencia, a condition that fulfills the current mining town of Pirapira-Palmarote, Municipality Libertador, Carabobo (Urbani, F. 2018).

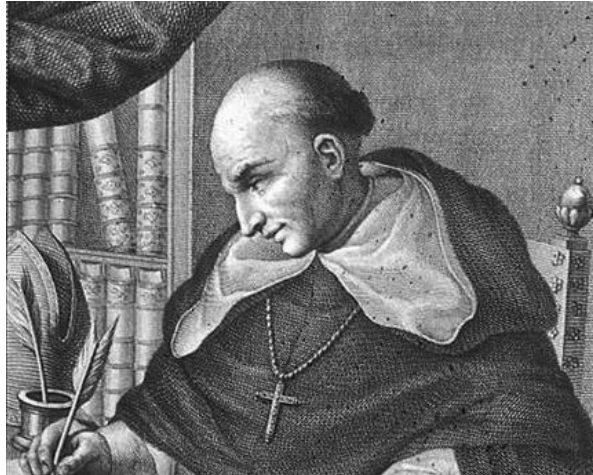
2) Apa and Carapa gold mines. Discovered by Sebastián Díaz de Alfaro in 1584. According to history and oral tradition, it was located between the hills of Apa and Carapa, especially in the Quebrada Pequeño Apa, which drains to the west of Morro de Apa, in the territory corresponding to the current Guatopo National Park. It was rediscovered in 1894 by German geologist Richard Ludwig (1848-1894), who died prematurely while returning from one of his explorations to the mine (Röhl, E. 1986).

## APPENDIX

**The reason why so many and such an infinite number of souls have died and been destroyed by Christians has been only because their ultimate goal has been gold [...]**

**Bartolome de las Casas,**

Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies - 1552. "Brevisima relación de la destrucción de Indias" (Seville 1552).



**Bartolomé de Las Casas** (c.1484 - 1566)

Portrait of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, by Tomas López Enguïdanos, 1791. National Library of Spain.



Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) receiving gifts from the cacique, "Guacanagari" of the island of Hispaniola (Haiti). In December 1492, Columbus established a trade based on a system of barter and exchange of objects called "rescate" (ransom). In exchange for glass beads, pieces of brass or bells, the Spaniards received sheets of **gold**, as well as wooden objects, cotton and food.

Source: Theodore de Bry (1594) 'Americae Tertia Pars IV'



"They gave him the torment of the rope treatment, poured burning tallow on his belly, put a horseshoe on each foot nailed to a stick and his neck tied to another stick and two men holding his hands, and thus they set fire to his feet and the tyrant came in from time to time and told him that he would kill him little by little with torments if he did not give him the gold".

Source: Bartolomé de las Casas (1552) Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies.

Engravings by Theodor de Bry, 1594. Miguel de Cervantes Virtual Library,  
<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/>

"And the cure or care they took of them was to send the men to the mines to dig gold, which is intolerable work, and the women were put on the estancias, which are farms, to dig the fields and cultivate the land, work for very strong and tough men. [...] To mention also the whips, sticks, slaps, punches, curses and a thousand other kinds of torments that they gave them during the work! In truth, it was impossible to say anything for a long time, not even on paper, and that it was to frighten men" (La Española).

Source: Bartolomé de las Casas (1552) Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies. Engravings by Theodor de Bry, 1594. Miguel de Cervantes Virtual Library, <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/>



The dogs of Vasco Nunez de Balboa (1475-1571) attacking the Indians. Engravings by Theodor de Bry (1594) *Americae Tertia Pars* IV.



History of America: Spaniards exploit gold mines. The Indians work before the eyes of the settlers. Engraving by Theodore de Bry (1528-1598). 16th century.

Source: De Bry, Theodor (1590-1634): *Amerika oder die Neue Welt*. Sievernich, Gereon (Hg.): Verlag: Berlin, N.Y. Casablanca 1990

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