

32

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Experiences and Reactions to Communication in the Spanish Atlantic (1492-1560)

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Abstract

The article analyzes the ways and conditions under which different agents reacted to handwritten communication in the Spanish Atlantic during the 16th century. In this context, the transmission of information by letter is understood as a multi-sensory experience and conceived in different ways by producers of correspondence. The hypothesis is that official and private letters were unique platforms for users to express various perceptions related to the communicative environment. To this end, men and women used various official and private sources (located in Spain and America) to speculate regarding certain postal exchange conditions. From the above we conclude that a universe of reactions to communication (or the lack thereof) existed in the early 16th century, during which time the base of correspondence producers broadened increasingly.

Keywords: experience, postal users, history of communication, Spanish Atlantic, letters, mail.

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Experiencias y reacciones frente a la comunicación en el Atlántico español (1492-1560)

Resumen

El artículo analiza las formas y condiciones en que distintos agentes reaccionaron frente a la comunicación manuscrita en el Atlántico español durante el siglo XVI. En este contexto, la transmisión de información por carta es entendida como una experiencia multisensorial y concebida de diferentes formas por los productores de correspondencia. Como hipótesis se plantea que las cartas oficiales y particulares fueron plataformas excepcionales para que los usuarios expresaran varias percepciones relacionadas con el entorno comunicativo. Para ello fueron utilizadas diversas fuentes oficiales y particulares (ubicadas en España y América) donde hombres y mujeres realizaron proyecciones sobre las condiciones de los intercambios postales. De lo anterior se concluye que en la primera parte del siglo XVI hubo un universo de reacciones frente a la comunicación (o incomunicación) y que la base de productores de correspondencia fue cada vez más amplia.

Palabras clave: experiencia, usuarios postales, historia de la comunicación, Atlántico español, cartas, correo.

Expériences et réactions à la communication dans l'Atlantique espagnol (1492-1560)

Résumé

Cet article analyse les modalités et les conditions dans lesquelles différents acteurs ont réagi à la communication manuscrite dans l'Atlantique espagnol au XVI^e siècle. Dans ce contexte, la transmission d'informations par lettre est appréhendée comme une expérience multisensorielle, vécue de diverses manières par les correspondants. L'hypothèse est que les lettres, officielles et privées, constituaient des plateformes exceptionnelles permettant aux utilisateurs d'exprimer diverses perceptions liées à l'environnement communicatif. À cette fin, différentes

sources officielles et privées (situées en Espagne et en Amérique) ont été utilisées, dans lesquelles hommes et femmes formulaient des projections sur les conditions des échanges postaux. Il en ressort qu'au début du XVI^e siècle, il existait une multitude de réactions à la communication (ou à son absence) et que le cercle des correspondants s'élargissait considérablement.

Mots-clés: expérience, utilisateurs du service postal, histoire de la communication, Atlantique espagnol, lettres, courrier

Introduction

This article aims to address the experiences and reactions of different actors to communication in the 16th century. Depending on previous experiences, the interlocutors were more or less patient with the conditions and time required for the flow of handwritten letters. Indeed, it was common to express thanks for a prompt response to a letter. When this was not the case, people were known to associate the lack of communication with a unilateral severance of political, emotional, or economic ties. Communication agents might speculate that the lack of communication was due to certain fatalities or accidents. Users were also capable of questioning the postal services or the efficiency of the messengers or transport devices through which letters were delivered.

As is well known, many individual and collective realities depended on the response to a letter. This was suggested in writing by the soldier Alfonso Clavijo in 1493, when he expressed his gratitude for the response to a petition requesting his «pardon». Clavijo had been a member of Christopher Columbus's troops and one of several individuals who had committed crimes before traveling to America. Thanks to the letter in which the King absolved him of his civil law violations, Clavijo was able to return to Spain with peace of mind and participate in productive activities without being questioned. This case is not exceptional, but like many others, it reflects the beginnings of a response-nonresponse dynamic and the play of interests regarding mobilization of correspondence between the people who inhabited the Spanish Atlantic.

In parallel, a set of material factors influenced the decision to create a response. Those who received a message had to find the resources to write the response (either by their own hand or, if the person was illiterate, through an intermediary), as well as the means of transportation necessary to put them into circulation. Obtaining supplies such as paper, ink, and messengers was at times one of the main communication challenges. Consequently, recipients of correspondence could choose not to respond to a written message due to their inability to access certain supplies or because they did not have access to postal distribution facilities.

Faced with a nonresponse, the primary sender could take steps such as writing a new letter to confirm receipt of a message or inquiring about the reasons for an apparent «silence». It was also not unusual for a nonresponse to letters to be taken as an affront or a sign of evasion of certain responsibilities. This was the opinion of Anton de Cogollos, who in 1545 accused Juan de Salamanca's heirs of not responding to his letters in order to avoid paying a debt that their father had acquired during his lifetime². The complainant resided in the town of Fontiveros (Castile), while the defendants were based in the city of Coatzacoalcos (New Spain). The two population centers formed a communication circuit separated by 9,000 kilometers, within which the exchange of oral and handwritten messages began to take shape.

The interlocutors I address in this essay formed a versatile *system* integrated by multiple forms of information exchange. To ensure the circulation of letters, Crown-protected means of transmitting information coexisted with unofficial messengers and other options. There was no public communication service as such, but rather a network of mail conductors who provided the service to official, ecclesiastical, or private agents. Likewise, I understand *users* of the postal system to mean those people who resorted to the multiple options available with the expectation that their correspondence would arrive at its final destination.

² «Al muy recordado señor», 1545, Coatzacoalcos, Archivo General de las Indias (hereinafter AGI), Seville-Spain, *Justicia*, 1010, n° 1, *Ramo* 2, f.10r-v.

As we will see, there were men and women who were willing to use the available options to communicate over short, medium, and long distances.

Within the communicative environment of Spanish America, it was possible to express oneself in writing with regard to the rhythms and circumstances of the circulation of handwritten information. With the aims of the present article in mind, I have analyzed reactions and responses to the communication or noncommunication experienced by those who used the postal circuits established between Castile and its colonies in the 16th century. The above is complementary to an active historiography that has considered the institutional and organizational sphere of the mail, especially during the second half of the 18th century³. Likewise, in recent years other researchers have proposed a focus on «early» communicative exchanges⁴. Indeed, since the beginning of the 16th century letters underwent a process of assimilation that transformed many of the information exchange practices in the Spanish Empire's possessions.

This work is meant as an approach to the communicative expectations within the Spanish Atlantic and the reactions provoked by the system in which communication occurred. Note that a two-fold relationship existed between the impacts induced by the use of letters in America and the manifestations

3 The following research stands out: Sylvia Sellers-García, *Distance and Documents at the Spanish Empire's Periphery* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 103-40, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvqsdxfn>; José Araneda Riquelme, *Un gobierno de papel. El correo y sus rutas de comunicación en tiempos de la reforma imperial en Chile (1764-1796)* (Santiago: Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, 2020), 76-103; Rocío Moreno Cabanillas, *Comunicación e imperio: proyectos y reformas del correo en Cartagena de Indias (1707-1777)* (Madrid: Sílex, 2022), 55-94; Rafael Cid Rodríguez, *Los correos marítimos de Indias en el siglo XVIII: expedición y circulación de la correspondencia* (Sevilla: UNED, 2022), 21-104.

4 Bethany Aram, «Distance and Misinformation in the Conquest of America», in *The Limits of Empire: European Imperial Formations in Early Modern World History*, ed. Tonio Andrade and William Reger (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 223-36; Renate Pieper, «Communication Networks of the Habsburg Empire (1493-1598)», in *From commercial communication to commercial integration: Middle Ages to 19th century*, ed. Markus A. Denzel (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2004), 21-35; Nelson Fernando González Martínez, «Communicating an Empire and Its Many Worlds: Spanish American Mail, Logistics, and Postal Agents, 1492–1620», *Hispanic American Historical Review* vol. 101, n° 4 (2021): 567-96, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/00182168-9366571>.

that emerged from this experience of information transfer. And although at times correspondence did not circulate due to logistical deficiencies, there were also numerous occasions when handwritten correspondence met users' expectations. Recent historiography has paid little attention to the universe of the letter-writer and his or her impressions, as well as their perceptions of the scope of communication. Specifically, this approach can contribute to the work of specialists in the world of postal history, written culture, and early modern 16th-century communication.

Maritime and *terrestrial* letters preserved in Spanish and American archives are revisited as a way of considering the phenomenon of the presence or absence of communication. A corpus of nearly forty letters was selected, each referring to other previously received letters, to communication expectations in terms of time, or offering assessments of what was expected from the different postal channels. To this we have added an analysis of certain transcontinental correspondence, as well as that which, as part of ecclesiastical or inquisitorial trials, was shared only at the local and regional levels. All this with a view to obtaining an Atlantic perspective on early modern communication.

I should also point out that, in the Castilian world of the 16th century, *maritime* (or overseas) correspondence was that which made transcontinental journeys. For its part, *terrestrial* correspondence was commonly identified as all missives that circulated throughout the continental spaces (which included small and medium-scale land, river, or sea routes)⁵. With this purpose in mind, I have carried out a documentary analysis of handwritten sources from archives located in Spain and different countries in America. The unique aspect of this research lies in proposing a re-reading of early colonial correspondence, assessing what that documentary base tells us about what users thought and expected of the system. The concepts of *experience* and *reaction* have been selected to carry out the proposed methodological approach. All of this, with the intention of conducting an exercise

⁵ Strikingly, correspondence transported around the Audiencia of Santo Domingo and all the islands of the Greater Caribbean was also considered non-overseas correspondence.

in connected histories that allows us to assess the imperial and Atlantic reach of the reactions to letter use.

In terms of temporality, the work addresses the period between the production of Columbus's letters, in 1492, and 1560. The latter date has been chosen as a closing date because it coincides with the beginning of the process that established the *Correo Mayor* concessions. These concessions implied the allocation in America of privileges that legitimized the priority given to individuals and family groups to mobilize official and ecclesiastical correspondence. Undoubtedly, the establishment of this new actor opened the field to other sensibilities and drove the profound postal changes occurring after 1560. In this case, however, I am interested in the reactions provoked by the mobilization of the «first» Atlantic handwritten correspondence involving European and non-European societies.

1. Feeling Communication

The use of letters presupposed a multi-sensory exercise from which multiple reactions emerged⁶. As is evident, a letter's contents were initially assimilated through the sense of sight. Likewise, the eyes made it possible to perceive the human and non-human agents that promoted the exchange of handwritten information. Several testimonies allow us to corroborate that messengers or vessels circulating with letters from America attracted the visual attention of individuals on roads or in ports. Similarly, observing correspondence being dispatched or arriving at its final destination provoked images that later became letters. For example, on the Andalusian coast it was not unusual for a messenger to be sent before a ship left for America to declare that he had been a *visual* witness to the forwarding of a specific package of correspondence⁷.

6 Regarding transculturation and enculturation of sensory practices, I suggest consulting: Martin Jay, «In the Realm of the Senses: An Introduction», *The American Historical Review* 116, n° 2 (2011): 307-15, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.116.2.307>; David Howes, *Sensorial Investigations: A History of the Senses in Anthropology, Psychology, and Law* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2023), 47-80, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271096261>.

7 «Respuesta a carta», 1520, Astorga, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Indiferente General*, 420 Leg. 8, f.185v-186v.

Similarly, letters were delivered into someone's «hands» and often materially transferred through this means. Indeed, one of the main concerns of information producers was that letters considered important would only be handled by trusted «hands.» In 1506 it became clear that Christopher Columbus sent «by his hand» a letter that modified his will (*codicil*)⁸. The Admiral ensured that the letter was handled only by a messenger he trusted. Improper opening or manual intervention of shipping containers was one of the most common concerns for mail producers when exchanging mail. Similarly, single or individual letters were often held using fine motor skills. Unlike a heavy or cumbersome object, the format for correspondence became increasingly more suited to the size of the human hand. Although the volume could vary, the letters that circulated between America and Castile, when folded, had a length close to 15x10 centimeters. This made them easy to carry and read with the upper limbs. Large rolls or cylinders were reserved for maps, drawings or special documentation.

In addition, the letters exchanged in Spanish America made constant allusions to practices related to the senses of hearing or speech. A large volume of information produced about the Indies shortly after Columbus's voyages was proclaimed and transformed into «orally» transmitted messages⁹. In various cases, what was «said» or «heard» was also used as an argumentative foundation for written documents. In 1534, conquistador Cristóbal Quintanilla, residing in Acla (today Panama), asked the King to be «heard» before being stripped of a piece of land and a group of Indians that had been entrusted to him.¹⁰

Indeed, a good part of the letters were written using oral linguistic structures. Individuals from different ethnic backgrounds took the liberty of writing as they spoke. This

8 «Testamento de Cristóbal Colón: codicilo», 1506 Valladolid, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Patronato*, 8, Ramo 4.

9 «Respuesta a carta», 1509 Valladolid, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Indiferente General*, 418 Leg. 2, f.38r-38v.

10 «Indios de Cristóbal Quintanilla», 1534, Madrid, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Panama*, 234 Leg. 5 f. 185v-186r.

was particularly noticeable in private or informal letters that had a more spontaneous handwritten feel. Even high-ranking officials involved in «Indian» affairs, such as the «oidor», were deeply connected to the dual function of hearing and writing. Inquisitorial testimonies and the inspections of royal officials (*residences*) stand out particularly for their allusions to orality. The auditory contents of these documents made the transition to the written word. Recently, Cécile Carayon highlighted the relevance of various «non-verbal» manifestations in scenarios of contact between Europeans and Americans¹¹. On an olfactory level, letters in most cases had no powerful smell. This sensorial characteristic differentiated handwritten documents from food, animals, or other artifacts that circulated within the Atlantic world.

In bodily terms, handwritten letters stimulated a sensation of «presence» or proximity despite the distance. In different areas, letters made it possible to maintain a «conversation with those not present»¹². This situation was driven by processes characteristic of early modernity, such as overseas expansion or conflicts, which required the constant circulation of updated information.

Gradually, various sectors accepted letters as a valuable mechanism for transmitting information. We should remember that in the early 16th century, various decrees signed by the King ratified the need for any vassal to be able to communicate from the Indies to Spain (or vice versa)¹³. And, during the period we are dealing with, because seeing or hearing the King and his most important institutions was the privilege of only a few, handwritten devices served as a way for vassals to connect with the monarchical figure. Even when postal distribution processes were far from optimal, correspondence was conceived

11 Cécile Carayon, *Eloquence Embodied: Nonverbal Communication Among French & Indigenous Peoples in the Americas* (Williamsburg; Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture; University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 156-57.

12 Antonio Castillo Gómez, «Me alegraré que al recibo de ésta...». Cuatrocientos años de prácticas epistolares (siglos XVI a XIX)», *Manuscrits: Revista d'història moderna*, n° 29 (2011): 20-21.

13 González Martínez, «Communicating an Empire and Its Many Worlds...», 568.

as a tool for communicating power and reacting to it. At the same time, signs such as seals, the type of writing, or the type of paper legitimized the contents of handwritten letters and made it possible to inform of the way that Castilian authority was represented in distant possessions¹⁴.

In different parts of the empire, and practically since 1492, there were people determined to narrate through letters their actions in the New World¹⁵. This action represented an effort to «make people feel» and inspire emotions through letters. In the official sphere, the recognition of «achievements» (sometimes exaggerated) might lead to *mercedes*, money, or further benefits for the vassals of the King of Spain. In this regard, a handwritten communication could act as a powerful sign of trust that gave weight to a request for a title or privilege. In 1493, and on the occasion of granting Juan de la Cosa a concession to exploit wheat, the Consejo de Castilla interpreted the constant sending of news related to certain European explorations carried out in the Greater Caribbean as a gesture of loyalty¹⁶. This type of communicative play generated affections, emotions, and commitments among Europeans, indigenous people, *criollos*, and other sectors that participated in the American colonization.

2. Letters for Reactions

It is useful to note that a *carta*, or letter, was conceived as correspondence (or mail) as long as it circulated between two or more recipients. The fundamental interest of the senders or receivers of letters was the transmission of a message and not commercial exchange. Handwritten mail, therefore, could not be interpreted as ordinary merchandise. Of course, it was possible to «sell» letters, but this was not what defined the existence of

14 Castillo Gómez, «Me alegraré que al recibo de ésta...». Cuatrocientos años...», 19-50; Verónica Salazar Baena, «El cuerpo del rey: poder y legitimación en la monarquía hispánica», *Fronteras de la Historia* vol. 22, nº 2 (2017): 140-68, doi: <https://doi.org/10.22380/20274688.109>.

15 Antonio Real Botija, *Hombres de armas, letras y tratos: los escribanos en la expansión imperial en las islas Filipinas (1568-1598)* (Valencia: Albatros, 2020), 37-38.

16 «Facultad a Juan de la Cosa», 1493, Barcelona, Archivo General de Simancas (AGS), Simancas-Spain, *Registro General del Sello*, LEG. 149305, 4.

most 16th-century correspondence. However, certain internal records or «memory documents» were not accorded the status of letters or correspondence because they had not been the object of a transfer. Certain notarial, personal, or ecclesiastical manuscripts were never copied or transported by any messenger. Consequently, there were documents that failed to become correspondence. The transmission of their contents, however, could occur through the reproduction of fragments or through oral communication.

At the logistical level, the Spanish-Indies letter mobilization apparatus was composed of flexible communication circuits. In the 16th century, the Castilian government did not require mail to travel along the same specific routes. On the contrary, broad permission was granted to use different mobility networks, depending on the available material and human resources. Rain and thieves, among other reasons, could cause the postal routes to change. In 1519, Mayor Gaspar de Espinosa described some of the difficulties the Spanish faced in communicating with cities founded in the territories currently known as Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela¹⁷; in any case, changing the routes used by the mail was not considered illegal. Such variations made it possible to send along different routes duplicates or triplicates of correspondence that took a long time to arrive or was at greater risk. Within Castile and in America, it was common for letters to be copied and put into circulation through different distribution circuits, as a strategy to improve the chances of arrival of relevant content¹⁸.

It was not unusual for various agents to express their feelings explicitly regarding communication. In 1559, the merchant Andrés Pérez said he felt «great pleasure» upon receiving a letter from his brother in Puebla (New Spain). He wrote that his brother's letter had moved him to tears of satisfaction («nos hartamos de llorar», or «we grew sick

17 Gaspar de Espinosa's journey is a rich source of details that makes it easy to imagine the vicissitudes of connection in the continental Caribbean. See «Viaje de Gaspar de Espinosa», 1519, Panama, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Patronato*, 294, n° 3.

18 «Copia de carta de privilegio», 1501 Granada, (AGS), Simancas-Spain, *Estado*, LEG. 1, 2, 2, 388.

of sobbing»¹⁹. Among other things, Pérez sent fifty ducats with a letter giving instructions on what should be done with the money. The funds were supposed to support his brother in Seville while his trip to Mexico was arranged through a merchant bank. Pérez asked for confirmation of the arrival of the money (in another letter) and to be informed of any news of his brother. Failure to notify reception of a certain amount of money could signal an alert for the need to report the messenger or might cause the sender to suspect some misfortune on the part of the recipient.

Within this adaptable and multi-sensory communication framework, several social groups with ties to the Indies expressed a «positive» feeling toward receiving correspondence. Oftentimes appreciation was shown for the reception of manuscripts containing new developments or updates on a topic. Officials such as treasurer and administrator Sancho Matienzo (ca. 1460-1521), for example, were highly valued for having maintained constant communication with royal institutions during his periods of service. Matienzo wrote letters from various Castilian, Italian, and American cities where he held important positions. Around 1508, Matienzo received a thank you from the King in the form of a royal decree for having communicated from the mountainous area of Urabá (located between present-day Panama and Colombia). The monarch even went so far as to «beg» him in writing not to fail to «give notice» of his trip to the new continental American territories that were being explored²⁰.

But there were also communications that expressed annoyance. These kinds of feelings could surface due to nonresponses, but also in response to content considered belligerent or excessive. This was the case with private lawyer Juan Méndez, who expressed the «struggle and distress» that the

19 «Hemos recibido una carta», 1559, Puebla, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Indiferente General*, 2049.

20 «Agradecimiento a Sancho de Matienzo», 1508, Burgos, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Indiferente General*, 1961 Lib.1, f.19v.

arrival of Juan Galvarro's letters had caused him²¹. According to Méndez, Galvarro accused him of not being diligent in managing the property his father had left in America. As in other cases, the family of the deceased wanted to settle the inheritances and receive the proceeds of the legal actions in Spain. In these cases, the heirs demanded information and collected all the postal material in order to demand swift action from the executors or custodians, who administered the assets of Spaniards who died in America.

Postal silence also evoked feelings of reciprocity. One such case involved two individuals residing in Mexico and Seville. Hernando de Zamora initiated the contact, acting on behalf of Elvira Martel, who resided in Spain and was the «curator and tutor» of one of her granddaughters²². The recipient of the message was Francisco Herrero, who acted as a solicitor for certain families in business and civil lawsuits. At the core of the epistolary dialogue was an attempt to find out whether Martel's granddaughter had been forced to marry a «boy of spurs» who was considered unworthy. Among the contents of the letter, the sender said he was responding to a group of «three letters» related to the possible marriage of the granddaughter residing in Mexico.

Francisco de Herrero testified to having received the aforementioned letters in Mexico over the course of a year and a half. The interlocutor claimed he had not responded because he was «very busy and away from this city [Mexico], and was sick for a while.» However, he described it as a distinction or «mercy» to have been chosen as the interlocutor in America for a prestigious Sevillian family. In these unofficial settings, the failure to respond by letter was seen as an act that violated loyalty and patronage. In effect, the sender expresses his guilt for not having drafted any letter to his «lords and friends».

21 «Carta de Juan Méndez», 1545, Coatzacoalcos, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Justicia*, 1010 n° 1, Branch 2.

22 «Al muy noble mi señor», 1543, México, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Justicia*, 1008 n° 3, Branch 1.

3. Change the System?

During the period under discussion, handwritten letters were distributed using various messengers and channels. The commercial, ecclesiastical, and military sectors turned to people of diverse ethnic origins who they believed could handle correspondence safely. Similarly, institutions such as *audiencias*, governorships, and town councils often had their own group of trusted mail carriers. Strictly speaking, they did not hold a position or function within the bureaucratic structure of the government. On the contrary, remuneration for their work was optional and varied according to the characteristics and complexity of the service. For both official and unofficial sectors, experience in the territory was a very important factor to take into account when «entrusting» a package of letters to a messenger²³. The more successful trips an individual made, the greater their chances of being commissioned for new services. Messengers were also sometimes muleteers, small-scale merchandise dealers, or alternated their work with artisanal, agricultural, or even mining jobs.

In several cases it has been assumed that, throughout the 16th century, the distribution of letters in America was coordinated by the so-called *Correos Mayores*; however, this way of evaluating the *Correos Mayores* must be reconsidered. Among other powers, individuals who held the privilege of *Correo Mayor* had the capacity to manage the messengers who transported official mail in some Castilian and American jurisdictions. Although the position of *Correo Mayor* of the Indies (or of the *Casa de Contratación*) was indeed created in 1514, the power was not exercised in America.²⁴ In practice, the main task of the *Correo Mayor* of the *Casa de la Contratación* was to monitor the transit of messengers from Seville to the Court and not in the

23 This was particularly visible with the transfer of evidentiary material or documents that could implicate the elites in the different kingdoms. See: «Carta remitida al gobernador Cresenio», 1559, s.l, Archivo General de la Nación de México, (AGNM), Mexico City-Mexico, *Indiferente Virreinal*, Correos, Caja, 6311-098 File (Exp.) 98, f. 1-2v.

24 Nelson Fernando González Martínez, «Mail Concessions for a Global Empire: *Correos Mayores* in the Spanish Empire in America (1514-1620)», *Fronteras de la Historia* vol. 27, n° 2 (2022): 290-93, doi: <https://doi.org/10.22380/20274688.2328>.

territories of the Indies. The circumstance analyzed changed only after 1560, when different *Correo Mayor* positions began to be assigned within strictly American territory²⁵. This panorama is undoubtedly important for understanding the conditions under which different perceptions regarding the exchange of handwritten information were expressed.

Among mail producers, the feeling that they could use a wide range of mechanisms to move letters grew stronger. In the present work, I propose to argue that this was due to two reasons: on the one hand, because the Habsburg government had difficulty establishing an enterprise that could cover the majority of the communication demands that existed in the Indies and; on the other hand, because the Castilian government assumed that the best way to guarantee long-distance communication was to maintain open and flexible channels.

Regarding *maritime* and intercontinental mail, each ship (official or private) was considered an option for mail transportation. As is known, it was not unusual for letters to arrive at ports in northern Castile, Portugal, or France, and then be routed to their final destination via internal transport routes²⁶. As for overland mail, although travelers might be more or less reliable, no routes were, in fact, censored for mail transport. This is because, unlike commercial ventures, in the 16th century, the flow of letters did not require the payment of any taxes.

Thus, there was no single postal agent established by force, nor was there a «public» postal company headed by the *Correos Mayores*; however, this was not seen as a weakness. On the contrary, some regular mail senders expressed uncertainty about having to transport their letters, especially through couriers managed by the holders of the *Correo Mayor* concessions. For example, and with this concern in mind, the members of the Mexico City *cabildo* sent a letter to the king

25 González Martínez, «Mail Concessions for a Global Empire...», 283-304.

26 For example: «Dos reales despachos», 1544, Lima-Valladolid, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Patronato*, 187, Ramo 1.

to oppose the allocation of a Correo Mayor concession in New Spain²⁷.

On the other hand, the model allowed for a gradual increase in coverage. In general, correspondence producers were free to receive letters by different means. Ultimately, the key focus was on staying connected and being able to make informed decisions. In 1534, the governor of Guatemala, Pedro de Alvarado, reported having received «several letters» that prompted him to modify his plans regarding the departure of a military expedition to Quito.²⁸ The information received by letter helped Alvarado decide when and how to travel.²⁹ From the letters received, Alvarado learned of the death of Pedrarias Dávila, one of the most influential and controversial figures in the region that Alvarado hoped to explore. These communications were complemented by oral news (not always coinciding) provided by the indigenous people or people who lived in the Indies.

There is no evidence to suggest that mail users in the early 16th century felt that the system (of multiple postal options) needed to be deconstructed. This approach allows us to address the issue of the cognition or perception of correspondence producers regarding the heterogeneous postal distribution mechanisms. In practice, letter-senders tended to blame their interlocutors for communication problems, rather than a dysfunctional or chaotic system. In other words, a lack of communication was not usually blamed on the communication system, but rather on its intermediaries. Indeed, state-backed postal concessions found limited support in America and only began to be established between the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century³⁰. Consequently, mobilization

27 I suggest seeing: «Después de haber escrito», 1582, Mexico, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *México*, 317.

28 «Carta de Pedro de Alvarado», 1534, Puerto Viejo, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Guatemala*, 39, Ramo 4, n° 9.

29 W. George Lovell, *Death in the Snow: Pedro de Alvarado and the Illusive Conquest of Peru* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 32-46, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780228015468>.

30 González Martínez, «Mail Concessions for a Global Empire...», 297-301.

of correspondence in the early part of the Conquest occurred under a plethora of unofficial carriers.

For authors such as Arndt Brendecke, John Elliott or Geoffrey Parker, the late 16th-century government of the Spanish empire was prolific in requesting and issuing information through letters³¹. Strangely enough, we know little about the expectations and perceptions of correspondence producers regarding the early 16th-century postal system; however, it's worth noting that during the first part of the 16th century America had already acquired valuable prior experience in communication, which shouldn't be dismissed. There were, of course, logistical problems and truncated mail flows, but these were foreseeable problems within a communication network with continental reach³².

Indeed, complaints about irregularities should not be confused with a general dissatisfaction with the postal system's capabilities. In this regard, it is worth highlighting the fact that several letter producers mentioned improper reading of letters or their vulnerability. In August 1526, Diego de Ocaña wrote a letter expressing his concern regarding the retaining and opening of letters; however, it quickly became clear that the person responsible for these intrusions and a series of excesses was Hernán Cortés³³. Ocaña devoted his extensive epistle to defending the claim that the powerful Extremaduran conqueror not only abused his power, but also, through many mechanisms, prevented residents of Mexico from sending news to Castile, when contrary to his (Cortés's) interests. Ocaña even suggested searching the homes of Spaniards to see «what they

31 Geoffrey Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 47; J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 330; Arndt Brendecke, *Imperio e información: funciones del saber en el dominio colonial español* (Madrid; Frankfurt: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2012), 256.

32 Jean Paul Zuñiga, «La tiranía del terreno. Territorialización, comunicaciones y administración en la América hispánica (siglos XVII y XVIII)», in *Las distancias en el gobierno de los imperios ibéricos: Concepciones, experiencias y vínculos*, ed. Roberta Stumpf and Gaudin Gaudin (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2022), 98, doi: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.cvz.29231>.

33 «El deseo que tengo», 1526, México, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Patronato*, 184, Ramo 6.

have written (...) to His Majesty», hoping to draw attention to the ability of individuals like Cortés and other agents of power to disturb the mobilization of information. In situations such as those described, there was no demand for mail distribution to be placed in the hands of the monarchy or that the circulation of private messengers be restricted.

Several cases serve to illustrate that users did not blindly insist upon demanding a change in the rules governing the distribution of information. The merchant Baltasar de Torres, for example, was quite meticulous in transcribing the information transmission mechanisms he used and the background of the contents in each. In one of his writings, written in 1558 from Arequipa (Peru), he indicated that he had no problem frequently sending letters to Spain or, in his own words, «[...] *con todos cuantos puedo escribo a VM (as many as I can write to Your Majesty)*»³⁴. He also stated that he had produced four letters in two months, three «long» and one «short.» Regarding flow in the other direction, Torres claimed to have received a handwritten communication from his mother during the same period, confirming receipt of a remittance. Each of the documents sent by Torres from Arequipa dealt with different topics and did not adhere to any predefined itinerary. Torres's messages seem to show a certain optimism regarding the possibility of writing at any time. In such testimonies, the ability to write and send information through different messengers emerges as a condition that was far from being considered a defect or limitation.

Along these same lines, in 1551 Juan Prieto analyzed the problem of not having received letters from his family for three years. Prieto felt the time that had passed was excessive and lamented the lack of response to several letters that addressed personal issues. However, far from proposing a change in the rules for exchanging handwritten letters, Prieto interpreted the silence as a «negligence» on the part of his family. In his long letter, he provided instructions regarding his business dealings

³⁴ «Con todo cuanto puedo», 1558, Arequipa, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Justicia*, 1060, n° 5.

in Spain and America, ordered the construction of a house, and requested that his friends be sent his greetings. Paradoxically, Prieto also asked his wife to forgive him, and his friends, for not writing to them for a long time. Specifically, he sent word: «Forgive me for not writing to you»³⁵. By this statement, the writer acknowledged his lack of diligence in sending letters to other relatives. It was an exercise in *mea culpa* in light of his failure to send letters given his business occupations. In any case, for the purpose of our work, it is worth recognizing that Prieto was far from blaming the system for not receiving letters or for not being able to write them.

Users also valued the ability to write and mobilize information spontaneously. In fact, they had the option of not adhering to the temporal or material provisions of a private or official third party. Pedro de Carmona, in a lawsuit that occurred in 1551, expressed his pleasure in being able to send a complaint to the newly created Audiencia de Lima about the theft of some horses that he had transported from Nicaragua³⁶. Such correspondence was mobilized at the local level using whatever mechanism the mail producer considered most rapid and convenient. Carmona was in a privileged position, as he had sufficient resources to produce letters and put them into circulation. Specifically, he had the social and/or economic capital to get his letters transported from the northern coast of Peru (near the city of Trujillo) to the courts in the city of Lima. In these cases, it's difficult to determine whether the mail was transported by a traveler in exchange for a salary or simply as a «favor»; however, both options were viable and feasible depending on the situation.

The learned ecclesiastical sectors had enormous power to produce, distribute, and react to correspondence. Nor did this condition generate a feeling of dissatisfaction. Individually, priests were authorized to write from virtually anywhere. In 1535, Dean Rodrigo de Bastidas, son of one of the most famous

35 «A la señora Sabina de Cabra», 1551, Potosí, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Justicia*, 1126, n° 3.

36 «Autos promovidos», 1551, Lima, Archivo General de la Nación de Perú (AGNP), Lima-Peru, *Real Audiencia, Causas civiles*, Leg.1, *Cuaderno*. 6, f. 5r-v.

early 16th-century explorers, reconstructed the different settings in which he had written half a dozen letters during a journey between Santo Domingo, Venezuela, and Panama. In this case, Bastidas was convinced that the correspondence sent during his trip had arrived and been read at their final destinations. He even made a list of his writing exercises designed to «give news» about processes related to the evangelization of the indigenous people and the constitution of bishoprics.³⁷ The prelate had no qualms about assuming the effective mobilization of his letters despite their having been produced in seemingly inhospitable places or places only recently explored by Europeans. Such postal actions show the ways in which a thread of discussion could be built and the reach of long-distance letters in the 16th century.

Similarly, the first investigations conducted in America for bigamy, heresy, blasphemy, and other offenses «against the Christian faith» also help in our study of the perceptions of priests who produced or received information about the system. Indeed, the priests estimated the system's flow times and the «ideal» conditions needed to allow for exchanges. In 1528, the canons and officials of the city of Santo Domingo were given six months to ship to Spain all the written information collected regarding a blasphemy trial. The trial investigators accepted the deadline as rational and managed to meet it³⁸. According to perceptions at the time, half a year was not considered too long a time in which to gather manuscript material, organize it, and send it to Spain for processing.

In short, the areas analyzed allow us to understand the heterogeneity of postal mobilization options as a communicative *experience*. Users were able to assimilate this circumstance in different ways; however, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that mail producers blamed the postal system for variations in the flow of letters. This allows us to revisit the idea that persistent users permanently criticized letter mobilization

³⁷ «Esta ciudad de Santo Domingo», 1535, Santo Domingo, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Santo Domingo*, 93, Ramo 1, n° 3.

³⁸ «Carta de Alonso de Suazo», 1528, Santo Domingo, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Justicia*, 42, n° 5.

patterns in the Spanish Atlantic. Obviously, there was room for complaints, but many of these had to do with the fact that the interlocutors (for a plethora of reasons) did not respond or did not want to respond to certain messages.

4. The Reactions of Many

Although logistics-related problems and delays were inevitable, the American postal system steadily transformed into a system that was familiar in everyday life and recognizable to multiple ethnic groups. Directly or indirectly, more and more men and women participated in such communicative sensoriality. As we have suggested, it was sometimes possible to produce letters by one's own hand. That is, without the need for an intermediary to assist in the physical constitution of the manuscripts; however, when this proved impractical, (literate) mediators such as local scribes or priests could be used. These mediators, whether paid or not, supported men or women incapable of carrying out such an exercise of discursive production on their own. As mentioned previously, in such a scenario various impoverished or illiterate sectors could be at a material disadvantage in preparing or sending letters. Access to paper and ink, in particular, was a restriction that impacted the production of handwritten letters.

In any case, conditions of subalternity did not prevent the emergence of numerous sensorialities in relation to handwritten documentation. Enslaved people quickly had to conceptualize which momentous decisions related to their condition were conveyed through correspondence. It is worth remembering that letters were used to arrange the sale of enslaved people, requests for freedom, and travel permits. Such devices were useful to the enslaved, as reactions to the law or even to «litigate» their freedom before the court³⁹; however, letters also served to denounce the enslaved sectors. Pedro, a «black slave», was accused of killing another man by stabbing him in the chest, causing him to bleed to death. Handwritten documents like this one led to correspondence that influenced the investigation, capture, or conviction of this

39 Chloe L. Ireton, «Black Africans' Freedom Litigation Suits to Define Just War and Just Slavery in the Early Spanish Empire», *Renaissance Quarterly* vol. 73, n° 4 (2020): 1277-1319, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/rqx.2020.219>.

type of non-Spanish populations⁴⁰. At various times, «black», «Indian» or «white» slaves were forced to assume the power of the letter to define the course of their lives⁴¹.

Thus, letters were linked to experiences such as captivity. Since the beginning of the 16th century, channels existed by which certain enslaved sectors could use handwritten documents. As with the King of Castile's other vassals, it was not illegal in principle for enslaved men and women to produce or receive letters. On the contrary, a Royal decree of 1540 ordered the auditors of the Audiencia de Panama to «hear» the petitions for freedom made by «blacks» and enslaved people⁴². The judges were also asked to protect these slaves from the reprisals and mistreatment that certain masters might inflict upon them in response to their requests for freedom. Of course, the verb «to hear» in this case did not imply solely and exclusively oral discourse. On the contrary, this form of listening did not rule out the use of handwritten letters. Indeed, provisions like these were essential to making it possible for various types of Afro-descendant captives and free people to use handwritten documents as a legal tool and for transmitting information, which offered certain advantages over oral communication. Letters, unlike oral discourse, allowed for the creation of lasting supporting documentation for requests and made it possible to initiate proceedings that could even be transported to Spain.

Likewise, indigenous people experimented with the use of handwritten correspondence. Gradually, handwritten letters replaced devices that awakened other communicative sensorialities, such as khipus or pre-Columbian codices.⁴³

40 «Denuncia de Sebastián Guerra», 1562 Campeche, Archivo Nacional de Cuba (A.N.C.), Havana-Cuba, *Justicia*, 1001.

41 For example: «Licencia de pase», 1505 Segovia, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Indiferente General*, 418 Lib. 1, f. 167; «Permiso a Francisco de Tapia», 1508 Burgos, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Indiferente General*, 1961 Lib.1, f.49r-49v.

42 «Sobre la libertad», 1540, Madrid, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Panama*, 235 Lib. 7, f.121v-122r.

43 José Carlos De la Puente Luna, «That Which Belongs to All: Khipus, Community, and Indigenous Legal Activism in the Early Colonial Andes», *The Americas* vol. 72, n° 1 (2015): 19-54, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/tam.2014.4>; Rebecca Dufendach, «“As If His Heart Died”: A Reinterpretation of Moteuczoma's Cowardice in the Conquest History of the Florentine Codex», *Ethnohistory* vol. 66, n° 4 (2019): 623-45, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-7683240>.

Often, sectors such as the *caciques* were particularly active in forwarding correspondence, both regionally and transcontinentally, sometimes even in languages such as Nahuatl.⁴⁴ In other cases, indigenous people traveled with correspondence or had attorneys in court who represented them in lawsuits. Regions such as Yucatán were settings with a large indigenous population, where the indigenous people were constant direct and indirect promoters of letters.⁴⁵ As with enslaved people and their relationship with handwritten correspondence, important decisions affecting the fate of indigenous people were also managed and discussed through correspondence. Added to all this was the role of translators of permanent or sporadic manuscripts, who were also essential for the transition from oral to written discourse.

The sensitivity that the letters awakened in indigenous people allowed them to communicate collectively. In these environments, letters represented an instrument of representation that was not merely individual. With particular vigor after 1540, and following the provisions arising from the Leyes Nuevas (New Laws) (1542), more indigenous people used correspondence to communicate with the authorities, among themselves, and with other ethnic sectors. Thus, in 1553, a group of Indians from central Mexico used several letters to request their exclusion from the compulsory labor imposed by the Spanish⁴⁶. The indigenous people, a collective of artisans from at least three towns, appealed to the use of voices like «we» that denoted the plurality of the communicative act. In fact, at

44 In most cases, indigenous correspondence was sent in Spanish, but some was in an indigenous language, appealing to disposition of «European» discourse. However, I suggest consulting sources such as: «Carta de los indios», 1557, Tochpan, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Guadalajara*, 51, Lib. 1, n° 33.

45 For an understanding of indigenous communication in Yucatán, the notable contributions of Caroline Cunill stand out. Above all, see: Caroline Cunill, «Siete cartas inéditas de Yucatán: comunicación privada entre mayas y españoles, y explotación ilegal del añil en el siglo XVI», *Estudios de Cultura Maya*, n° 45 (2015): 91-120; Caroline Cunill, «Los intérpretes de Yucatán y la Corona española: negociación e iniciativas privadas en la fragua del imperio ibérico, siglo XVI», *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 18, n° 4 (2013): 361; Caroline Cunill, «Un mosaico de lenguas: los intérpretes de la Audiencia de México en el siglo XVI», *Historia Mexicana* vol. 68, n° 1 (2018): 7-48, doi: <https://doi.org/10.24201/hm.v68i1.3637>.

46 «Indios de los barrios de Atlampa, Tlalcocomulco y Jancopinca», 1553, s.l. (AGNM), Mexico City-Mexico, *Indiferente Virreinal*, Indios, caja-exp.: 1182-004.

no social level was it unusual to send letters collectively, that is, on behalf of a group. In cases such as that of central Mexico, the senders wanted to be seen not as «one» but as many. In fact, the recipient felt the voice of several people expressing a position on a particular issue might reinforce the claim or request due to the apparent power of the collective voice.

The volume of these letters in circulation depended on multiple factors, but it can be said that it was constant and increasing. In keeping with the regulatory frameworks applied to most social sectors, it was entirely legal for women to send and receive handwritten correspondence. Some, of their own initiative, were successful in directly addressing the Council of the Indies or the King himself, to express their feelings and make requests⁴⁷. In 1540, Elvira Arias, a «maiden» orphaned by both father and mother, had conviction enough to request (in writing) the remainder of a pension obtained by her father⁴⁸. Likewise, Inés Muñoz de Rivera, Francisco Pizarro's sister-in-law, wrote to Emperor Charles V to share her various personal hardships and request the reassignment of an *encomienda*. Doña Inés defined her letter as a tool of «refuge» to obtain «remedy» from the King for different «works and needs» that she had experienced⁴⁹. In the aforementioned document, she claims to be one of the female «subjects» of the Castilian king.

Of course, women also managed to react to the flow of letters. Disputes over property, family separation, or war motivated various female presences in the epistolary universe⁵⁰. Women constantly received and sent handwritten messages.

47 Adrian Masters, «Influential Women, New World Riches, and Masculine Anxieties in the Development of the Spanish Council of the Indies, 1524–98», *Renaissance Quarterly* vol. 74, n° 1 (2021): 94-136, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/rqx.2020.314>.

48 «Pago de cierta cantidad», 1540, Madrid, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Panama*, 235, Leg. 7, f.101v-102r.

49 «Viuda del capitán», 1543, Lima, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Patronato*, 192, n° 1, Ramo 32.

50 In this regard I suggest consulting: Liliana Pérez Miguel, «Mujeres de ánimo viril: estereotipos y roles de género en la conquista de América S. XVI», *Historia Y MEMORIA*, n° 28 (2024): 61-102, doi: <https://doi.org/10.19053/20275137.n28.2024.15566>; Liliana Pérez Miguel, «Mujeres ricas y libres»: mujer y poder: Inés Muñoz y las encomenderas en el Perú (s. XVI) (Seville: Editorial Universidad de Sevilla, 2020), 117-64.

They also provoked reactions in third parties who made them important subjects of correspondence. In 1499, the escape of Juan Gómez's wife «with another» man who was in the Indies, activated an interesting communication circuit in different possessions within the Castilian world⁵¹. Women expressed their frustrations, pain, and ruin through letters. Such was the case of Teresa Rodríguez, who informed the Moguer courts of her husband's manipulations to force her to spend her dowry money on investments related to the Indies⁵². This missive highlights the deception and paradoxes of a Christian woman who saw civil authorities as the only way to save part of her family's wealth.

Gradually, not only the female relatives of famous conquistadors and wealthy Spaniards incorporated the use of letters. In addition to contributions from recent historiography to our knowledge of these elite interlocutors, other types of users can also be traced through secondary references. Through a response written by her bricklayer husband, we learn that Catalina Guillén sent two letters expressing her anxiety regarding a lack of communication. Her authorization to travel America to join her husband depended on these letters⁵³. Catalina's husband admitted that he had not responded diligently to her letters due to his occupation as a craftsman. Neither were Black or Indigenous women restricted in their use of formal and informal correspondence. During inquisition proceedings, some non-Spanish women were able to communicate with the accusing bodies in writing and provide statements in response to rumors that could lead to initiation of proceedings⁵⁴. Free Black women or *mulatas* were also able to communicate with their partners and family members through missives. This seems to have been the case for Ana Gómez, an Afro-descendant woman working in commerce in the city of Nombre de Dios.

51 «Para que se busque», 1499, Ocaña, (AGS), Simancas-Spain, *Registro General del Sello*, LEG, 149901 206.

52 «Iniciativa», 1501, Granada, (AGS), Simancas-Spain, *Registro General del Sello*, LEG, 150103,252.

53 «Catalina Guillén», 1556, Tehuantepec, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Indiferente*, 2049, n° 13.

54 «Documento relativo a Elvira Pérez», 1545, Mexico, (AGNM), Mexico City-México, *Indiferente Virreinal, Inquisición*, caja-exp.: 1691 14 f.1r.2v.

A dispute over her inheritance drew attention to her multiple communication networks and dynamic commercial activity in the Caribbean.⁵⁵ Elsewhere, and based on experience acquired in similar processes within Europe, the clergy were important mediators in bringing what was «said» or «heard» to the written plane. In principle, these Christian agents had no restrictions on transforming oral manifestations into handwritten ones. On the contrary, one of the most valued abilities of ecclesiastical judges was to create letters from non-verbal information collected in numerous areas of the empire. Although there was local circulation, many ecclesiastical materials were sent to Spain for confirmation or final judgment. This was the case of the muleteer Ruy Díaz in the 1530s⁵⁶, whose trial included a wealth of testimony from the merchant Melchor Valdivieso, who declared that he had evidence that the muleteer wrote and expressed opinions «against God».

The proceedings carried out by ecclesiastical or inquisitorial institutions also represent a privileged niche for understanding postal exchange practices between individuals who were not royal officials or important merchants. On countless occasions, the accused or witnesses indicated with whom they had exchanged written messages and the ways in which certain non-verbal information had reached them⁵⁷. In this sense, we can highlight the power of ecclesiastical institutions to collect correspondence in various urban and rural centers at the beginning of the 16th century and transfer it to the main ecclesiastical courts of the Indies. The investigation of Francisco de Ledesma (a priest living in Cuba) around 1548 on grounds of concubinage, fraud, and other crimes allows us to analyze the communication networks of the cleric with people who, like certain men and women close to him, were not part of an

⁵⁵ Thanks to Chloe Ireton for locating these proceedings. See: «Ana Gómez», 1599, Several places, (AGI), Seville–Spain, *Contratación*, 257A, n° 3, Ramo 12.

⁵⁶ «El dicho Melchor Romero», 1532, Antequera, (AGNM), Mexico City-Mexico, *Inquisición*, 14, Document (Doc.) 1, f.1r-5v.

⁵⁷ Laura Matthew, «Two Bigamists in Tehuantepec: Global(ized) Itineraries in Southern Mesoamerica, circa 1600», *Hispanic American Historical Review* vol. 103, n° 2 (2023): 257, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/00182168-10368907>.

elite⁵⁸. Investigations like these might even collect evidence in places such as Cuba, but the proceedings were carried out, for example, in Santo Domingo, making contact through written information essential.

Little by little, the postal system grew stronger and became accessible to an ever-wider user base. This, in turn, allowed for more diverse «voices» to emerge within mail-producing sectors. People of mixed race, Indigenous people or those of African descent did not necessarily propose projects to disrupt the structure of the postal system; however, their «voices» can be perceived in the expectations they expressed regarding the rhythms and forms of communication. Reacting to a nonresponse or writing again to confirm the arrival of a message can be understood as part of the interaction between correspondence producers who were not part of a political, economic, or religious elite. It is also significant that ethnic groups other than the Spanish chose to view handwritten information exchange mechanisms as a viable way to communicate with official and private institutions. In the 16th century, the exclusion from written culture or a lack of resources were not necessarily definitive obstacles preventing sectors in subaltern conditions from choosing correspondence as a viable means of communication.

It can also be argued that this sense of trustworthiness among various sectors was also due to the more frequent use of postal monitoring and surveillance devices. A more systematic production of inventories and devices to track the production of correspondence that circulated across the Atlantic began in the early 1530s. While it is true that letter inventories had been in use since the Middle Ages in the Castilian world, only gradually did they become a recurring practice within Indian institutions. In the Casa de la Contratación, the Consejo de Indias, and later in certain audiencias or town councils, books of «dispatches» were created to record correspondence circulating

58 «El fiscal con Francisco de Ledesma», 1548, Havana-Santo Domingo, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Justicia*, 993 n° 1, Ramo 1.

over long distances⁵⁹. Although these devices were intended to keep track of correspondence sent in Spain and America, they set a formal precedent for monitoring postal procedures that would develop more vigorously in the 17th century.

In the first decades of that century, the Castilian government issued several warnings to prevent dispatches from being opened or read without the consent of the senders or recipients of the letters. Furthermore, short documents confirming the «acknowledgment of receipt» of letters proliferated. These could be quickly delivered on the return trip of the messenger who had brought the correspondence or shortly after. This strategy worked especially in overland territories (Castilian and Indian) and, to a lesser extent, at the intercontinental level. In fact, over time more specific certificates were created to attest to the arrival of letters. In 1540, the King emphasized his sending of a «brief note» to Panama confirming the arrival of a packet of handwritten correspondence sent by the conquistador Francisco Pizarro⁶⁰. The information was related to the bloody wars that had broken out in Peru and Chile. What made this practice unique was that it created exclusive devices for overseas mail to confirm the experience of having received a group of letters.

Similarly, through a document signed by the King in 1533, Jácome de Grimaldo was commissioned in Seville to inspect the circulation of certain papal bulls between Rome, the Court of Castile (where he was staying overnight), and the ports that would make it possible for said correspondence to reach the Indies. Specifically, Grimaldo would be in charge of monitoring the circulation of handwritten documentation related to the creation of the bishoprics of Santa María Antigua del Darién and Tierra Firme (in present-day Panama, Venezuela, and Colombia). His administration was considered essential to carrying out a massive evangelization process in several places with significant indigenous populations. His role was to

59 «Registros Honduras e Higueras», 1525-1605, various cities, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Guatemala*, 402.

60 «Recibo por el rey», 1540, Madrid, (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Patronato*, 90A.

coordinate the arrival of religious documentation to America and confirm its reception in exchange for a salary of 30 ducats.⁶¹ Actions like these undoubtedly generated a sense of surveillance among church authorities and other non-religious users of the mail.

Conclusion

In the early 16th century, the handwritten letter became one of the main means of transmitting information within and outside Spanish America. Coexisting with orality, letters allowed the transmission of all kinds of perceptions regarding communication. Its use transformed the way non-European societies related to those in power and, in the medium term, to other sectors of the population. Europeans, for their part, relied on this technology for the transcontinental transmission of information to their overseas subjects. Even letters that did not deal with topics specifically related to information distribution patterns frequently made reference to emotions linked to the reception (or non-reception) of correspondence. The evidence, however, does not support the claim that the producers of official, ecclesiastical, or private letters were obsessed with criticizing the structure of the system or the fact that multiple unofficial postal transport options existed. On the contrary, users tended to question their interlocutors rather than existing patterns of mail exchange.

Thus, a new hermeneutics of the letters exchanged in the 16th century is proposed. The above alludes to the possibility of interpreting reactions to receiving correspondence as evidence of users' expectations of the system. According to the proposal stated in this essay, the references made by certain interlocutors regarding the receipt of previous letters or the lack of responses can help us understand the expectations of correspondence producers with regard to the postal system. I propose rereading the letters from the Habsburg period, focusing on waiting times, places of previous exchanges, messengers, emotions, or other

61 «Por cuanto», 1533, s.l. (AGI), Seville-Spain, *Santa Fe*, 230.

situational elements that various interlocutors refer to when writing a letter.

At the empirical level, an approach to this correspondence (grounded in reactions and experiences) can be useful in two ways: On the one hand, it allows for the assessment of any type of official and private correspondence as a postal testimony, revealing perceptions about the capabilities and rhythms of the postal system; and on the other, it makes it possible to construct a broader notion of «user» in which the writers of letters expressed themselves in relation to the system, even when they had different ethnic backgrounds and different access to literacy.

Indeed, one of the characteristics of the historiography related to this subject has been to prioritize the institutional or organizational approach rather than that of «practices.» Likewise, this work lays the groundwork for revisiting, from a historical perspective, the correspondence used in the Spanish-Indian world before the creation of the *Correo Mayor*. After 1560, these institutions endorsed the introduction of a new actor that managed the distribution of information in cities such as Mexico City, Lima, and Santiago de Guatemala; however, the experience of the flow of letters that occurred at the beginning of the 16th century, which is the subject of this article, was fundamental to this.

Final statements

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