

Postal networks and global letters in Cartagena de Indias: The overseas mail in the Spanish empire in the eighteenth century

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Abstract

In the eighteenth century, all European colonial empires undertook the task of institutionalising their postal systems. Within the framework of the Bourbon reforms, the Spanish monarchy embarked upon reforming the postal system within the Spanish American with the aim of making transatlantic communications more reliable and regular. These plans, however, were hampered by an ongoing power struggle between all agents with a stake in the circulation of information. This is clearly reflected in the postal office in Cartagena de Indias, which was a key node for the Crown and a point of confluence for the strategies and interests of different local and global powers; the office, therefore, faithfully represented the polyhedric reality of postal communication. This paper shows that the institution had its own agency by constituting one of the main power tools, which is a reflection of the close relationship that exists between empire and communication.

Keywords

Communication; circulation of information; Atlantic World; Spanish Monarchy; Caribbean; Early Modern World.

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Introduction

Fernand Braudel said that in the Early Modern Age the greatest concern for politicians was the arrival of the mail.¹ It was crucial that the postal service be well organized and functional in order to ensure a fast and efficient flow of information and knowledge between overseas colonies and imperial governments. The mail was essential for empires to exercise their dominance and power more effectively under the conditions imposed by colonial rule. It was a matter of maintaining a dynamic link between the need for information, the act of informing and the order issued, with the essential action of tangled procedures and mediators controlling the possibilities of communication. Therefore, knowledge was understood as a means of socio-political and economic control of imperial spaces. The aim was to overcome the blindness of the sovereign and acquire ideal models of total domination.²

European empires, such as France, Britain, Spain, and Portugal, wanted their governments to exercise control in their respective postal systems through increased bureaucracy and reorganization.³ The French Empire promoted postal reform starting from the second half of the seventeenth century, and a new system was in place by the eighteenth century.⁴ The British Empire established direct administration of the postal system between 1660 and 1711. After numerous failed attempts, temporary measures, and resistance, in 1711 the *Post Office Act* was passed and the American colonies were incorporated into the British imperial postal system with England, Ireland, and Scotland.⁵ After the Seven Years' War, the British government intensified all reform plans, including postal reform. It introduced a new regulatory framework: The *Post Office Act* of 1765. This act introduced the idea of a postal monopoly in its territories. The reform sought to establish an organized and efficient flow of postal communication and came to serve as a model for other imperial states. In Spain, postal reforms included the creation of a maritime postal system in 1764 and a land postal system in

the interior of Spanish America in 1769, both under the supervision of the Crown.⁶ In the Portuguese Empire, the establishment of the overseas posts between Portugal and Brazil occurred in 1798 with the enactment of the *Alvará de criação dos Correios Marítimos para o Brasil* which followed the pattern of the British and Spanish states.⁷

This shows that, in postal matters at least, there were no differences between the various models of sovereignty, since whether the state was under an absolute monarchy or a parliamentary system, they were pursuing the same goal: a government postal monopoly.⁸ Moreover, the models of postal institutionalization circulated from one empire to another through emulation. Here, the European imperial states improved themselves through reciprocal imitation, for example, each one carefully monitored the actions of the others in order to benefit from the usefulness of their ideas and inventions.⁹ This strategy was used to improve the postal service in order to be able to compete with their rivals.

These postal services increasingly became an intricate network with a large number of agents and communication channels. By the eighteenth century, the imperial postal communication networks were highly complex and had an extraordinary geographical scope.¹⁰ The different strategies and spheres of power had an essential human and material support in the postal system to implement the communicative process that established connections between the different imperial spaces.

This paper analyses the postal system reform projects that took place in the colonial empires during the eighteenth century and the role they played in cementing the imperial-colonial relationship. Specifically, it focuses on the Spanish Monarchy which, under the paradigm of the Bourbon reforms, promoted reforms to the Spanish-American postal system with the aim of making colonial communications more organized and regular. These plans for postal renovation were developed in practice with a deployment of different strategies and agents that participated in the circulation of information. This is reflected in the

administration of the Cartagena de Indias post office, which was a fundamental nucleus for the Crown where strategies and interests of the different local and global powers converged to form a polyhedral reality of postal communication. Therefore, this study reveals how the polycentric monarchy continued to be the main key to the stability of the empire in the eighteenth century. And it also shows that the postal service had its own agency in the configuration of these European empires.

The historiographical debate on Bourbon reformism is long and complex, ranging from a more traditional to a more critical and revisionist approach.¹¹ The perspective of this research is based on the ideas of the latest historiography of the Bourbon reforms, which emphasise the importance of analysing how the reforms were applied to Spanish-American territory, and the reaction and resistance that they caused, in order to understand how in these spaces local autonomy clashed with the attempts at direct action by the Crown and the limits that existed.¹² It also adopts the perspective of current approaches that recognize the multi-territoriality of modern European states, in which government action was based on hierarchies and asymmetric connections between the different spaces of power in a complex political structure that was solid and durable, as well as malleable and changing.¹³

Forging the postal project as an economic network between Spain and Spanish America

Under the Bourbon Monarchy, the postal reform project materialised with the establishment of the Maritime Post Office to Spanish America during the second half of the eighteenth century. This confirmed the role of the Atlantic Ocean as a unifying corridor and transmitter of information, culture, and economic products.

Pedro Rodríguez de Campomanes, like many other enlightened political agents, considered in his reports that in order to achieve the objective of improving and consolidating the economy of the Spanish monarchy, it was necessary to facilitate the transfer of trade

between Spain and Spanish America through the postal service; traders needed a secure, fast, and reliable mode of communication.¹⁴ This approach culminated in the postal reform which proposed a monopoly by the Crown of the right to transport all correspondence and the attempt to extinguish parallel systems, reflected in the legislation enacted during the reforms.¹⁵ On 24 August 1764, the *Provisional Regulations of the Maritime Post Office of Spain to its West Indies* were published.¹⁶ These regulations contained the necessary provisions for the establishment of the new postal system and detailed the procedures for the organization, management, and transport of overseas correspondence.

One of the key decisions of the project was the choice of ports which would serve as the hubs of the overseas postal service. On the one hand, the port of Havana was chosen as the centre for the redistribution of mail in Spanish America because of its geostrategic position. Havana was one of the great enclaves of the Atlantic that had a relevant infrastructure and organisational framework for maritime traffic, with a strong dynamic interaction of the forces of the hinterland and foreland, was a mediator of its links with Spain and other European empires, and had been vector of a global information flow since the sixteenth century.

On the other hand, Corunna was chosen as the main port of the overseas communications system in Spain. The purpose was to integrate Galicia into the Spanish-American maritime and commercial traffic. Furthermore, Corunna was less exposed to attack by enemy vessels than Cadiz, whose proximity to Gibraltar continually threatened its security. Moreover, it had alternative ports nearby, such as Ferrol, which were safe havens for ships in the event of storms or persecution. And its geostrategic position between Britain and Portugal could threaten the traditional connection between the two allied powers. Another main reason for this choice was that Corunna had great experience in being the head of the postal communication circulation. In this respect, the port of Corunna had served as a postal link with England, specifically with Falmouth, from 1689 to 1815, with some interruptions in

periods of war between the two empires.¹⁷ The so-called Corunna boats or Spanish packets operated in this line of maritime mail, transporting official and commercial correspondence from England to Spain and to Portugal.¹⁸

The selection responded to geographical and political issues. This decision gave the port of Corunna the privilege of being the only official port, together with Cadiz, to have its own overseas exchange line. However, one of the main aspirations of the Bourbon monarchy was to break the Andalusian commercial monopoly. Paradoxically, the reform of the control of communications ran in parallel with the break-up of the monopoly. At this point, it should be noted that the desired monopoly with Spanish America really had very different profiles. In practice, it acted as a platform for the participation of a multiplicity of agents who had a high degree of autonomy with respect to central power and who, despite operating from Cadiz, and not from Madrid, did not act to the detriment of the high degree of autonomy of the multiple centres of power in Spanish America.

The packet boats that left the port of Corunna were an effective commercial route.¹⁹ These ships entered into competition with Cadiz's trade. This was due to the fact that the improvement of the postal system was not only intended to channel communication flows, but also commercial ones through an official channel imposed by the Crown. In these packet boats, goods were introduced on behalf of the captain, the pilot, the postmaster of Corunna or private individuals, who had to pay the appropriate fee to be able to transport their goods.²⁰ The private ships could carry letters as long as they passed through the post office, paid the corresponding fees, had their licence, and were carried in a closed suitcase. The Crown was tolerant in the transport of correspondence, as long as postage was paid, and mail and goods were kept under control.²¹ Therefore, the major problem with letters and goods being transported illegally was the failure to pay the transport fee, which should be collected by the

Royal Treasury because this financial issue was an important part of the reason for postal reform.

However, some merchants took advantage of this situation to introduce goods illegally onto private vessels without paying the fees and without a licence.²² A similar situation occurred in the British and Portuguese maritime postal services, which were also authorised to transport goods and passengers in compliance with their legal frameworks. The illegal introduction of mail, goods, and passengers was thus a common practice that took place on the ships of these European colonial empires.

In the Spanish postal service, Álvaro de Castro, captain of the packet boat *El Cortés*, was accused of transporting goods in a hidden and clandestine manner. For this reason, his goods were confiscated, and he was imprisoned, although he escaped.²³ Other cases include those of three sailors from the packet boat *El Gallego*, who were imprisoned on 15 September 1768 for trying to transport seven barrels of wine and eighty-six shirts in a fraudulent manner; and those of five other sailors from the packet boat *El Rey*, who illegally transported thirty-four boxes of tobacco in September of the same year.²⁴

Continual fraud on the packet boats led to cases where the cargo of clandestine letters significantly exceeded the registered one. This was the case of a packet boat that arrived on 10 April 1765 at the port of Ferrol from Havana. The ship's report showed that it was carrying nine boxes of letters when in reality it was carrying fifteen.²⁵ These fraudulent practices were so common that the postmaster of Corunna, José Antonio López, informed the Postmasters General located in Madrid that it was common for packet boats from or to Spanish America to be fraudulent.²⁶ In addition, it was common for the authorities to be involved and complicit in these frauds.

The relationship, both legal and illegal, between trade and mail is essential to understanding the socio-political and economic dynamics of the Spanish Empire. Thus, the

postal reform enacted in 1764 opened the way for the free trade regulations of 1765. In fact, the postal project already reflected the proposals for more flexible trade with the opening of various commercial routes that broke the Cadiz monopoly, such as the configuration of the port of Corunna as a competing centre of communication, trade, and navigation to Spanish America, and the transport of goods in the packet boats that were outside the control of the Consulate of the Indies and the Council of the Indies. For these reasons, both organisations in the Indies were vehemently opposed to the Spanish-American postal reform project.²⁷

Flows and routes of Atlantic postal exchange

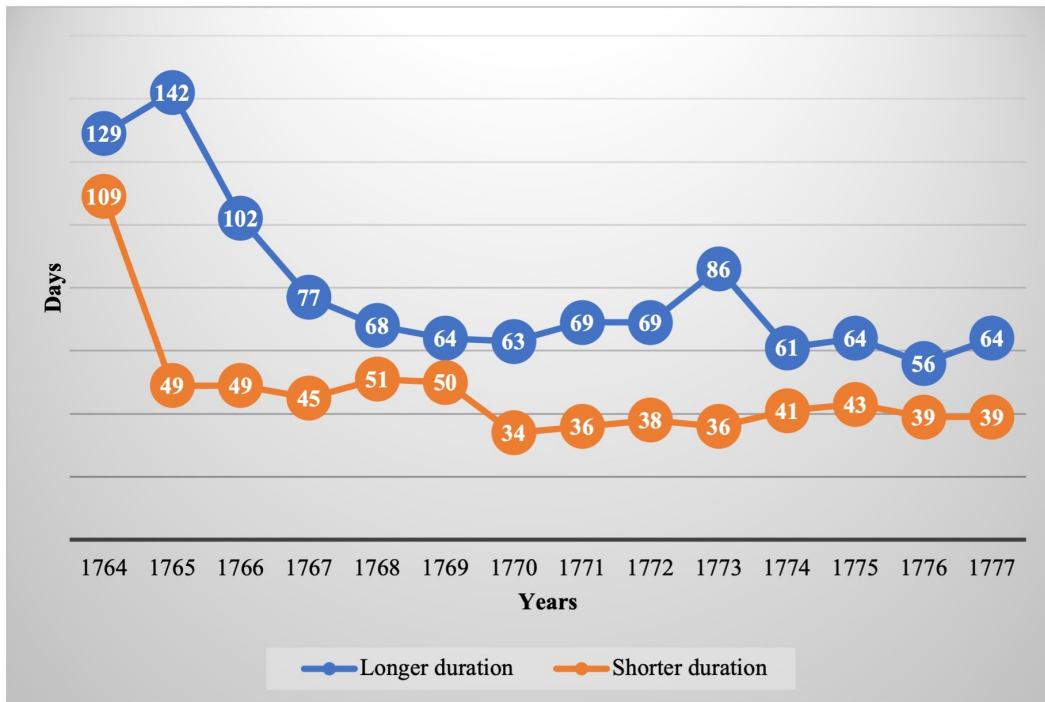
The *Provisional Regulations* determined the maritime postal route: the packet boat would depart from Spain, specifically from the port of Corunna, on the first of each month, to La Habana. This route was called *Carrera de La Habana*. Once it arrived in La Habana, two ships would be dispatched from there: one to Veracruz that would carry the correspondence to the viceroyalty of Nueva España (*Carrera de Veracruz*), and another from the port of Trinidad in Cuba to Cartagena de Indias that would transport the correspondence through the interior of the south of Spanish America (*Carrera de Cartagena*).²⁸ The implementation of this postal route was motivated by the government's desire to expand its control of priority areas of the empire, such as the Caribbean, because of the urgency of domination that had caused the Seven Years' War. Another route called *Carrera de Buenos Aires* was added in 1767. A packet boat went from Corunna to Montevideo to carry the letters from there to Buenos Aires on the fifteenth of every other month.²⁹

These routes had their spatial expression in lines of navigation that aimed to redefine the links between Spain and Spanish America, with an organization of the space in function of the communicational nodes and their respective administrative units.³⁰ This distribution and diversification of postal routes also took place in the British Empire where packet boats, from

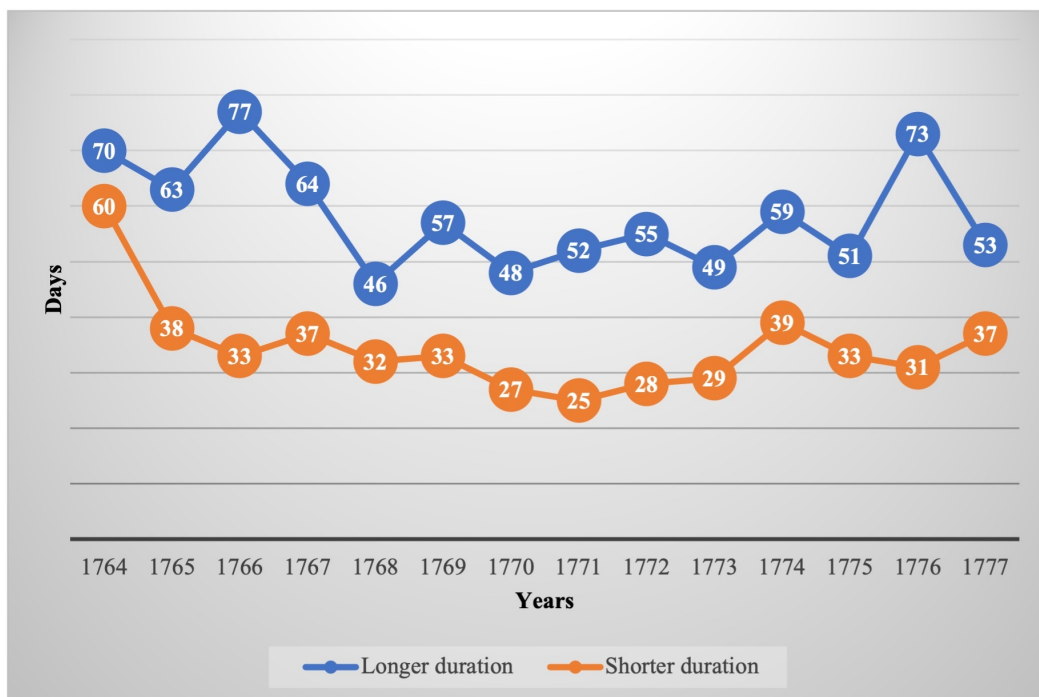
1764 onwards, departed from England for three communication axes in the colonies: New York, Charleston, and the West Indies.

For imperial governments, the idea and need for a scheduled postal service was their main concern. The intended acceleration of postal communications through a monthly organization of the maritime mails made it possible to improve the course of the postal system. The frequent and methodical dispatch of packet boats was the main incentive for the desired regularity in the flow of information between the two continents. However, the timetable, imposed by the *Provisional Regulations*, was hardly ever respected by the packet boats. This was due to delays or loss of mail caused by adverse weather conditions or human error.

The following graphs show the maximum and minimum times it took a packet boat to run the *Carrera de la Habana* in the period between 1765 and 1777. They confirm a degree of irregularity and inequality in the packet boat's schedule. On the one hand, Graph 1 shows that the longest journey was made in 1765 with 142 days, and the shortest in 1770 with 34 days. On the other hand, Graph 2 shows that the longest journey took place in 1766 with 77 days, and the shortest in 1771 with 25 days.



Graph 1. Travel time of the packet boats from Spain to America between 1764 and 1777.
 Sources: My own elaboration based on data from AGI, Correos, 469 B and AGI, Correos, 269 A – 276 B.



Graph 2. Travel time of the packet boats from America to Spain between 1764 and 1777.
 Sources: My own elaboration based on data from AGI, Correos, 469 B and AGI, Correos, 269 A – 276 B.

The maritime postal routes often did not comply with the provisions of the regulations, causing irregular fluctuations on the overseas dispatches. Table 1 shows the departures of the packet boats from Corunna to La Habana during the year 1765. This reveals that all the packet boats of the *Carrera de la Habana* did not depart on the first day of each month. However, they did depart on the first days of the month, except in some cases. An analysis of the annual circulation of the packet boats of the *Carrera de La Habana* shows a certain regularity, as these packet boats sailed monthly, except in July. This reflects the fact that official correspondence increased, enhancing contacts between Spain and Spanish America, through the flexible dynamism of the new postal communication network.

Packet boat name	Departure from La Coruña
El Magallanes	3 January 1765
El Gallego	3 February 1765
El Quirós	8 March 1765
El Rey	7 April 1765
El Príncipe	3 May 1765
El Colón	1 June 1765
El Grimaldi	2 August 1765
El Cortés	1 September 1765
El Magallanes	11 October 1765
El Gallego	3 November 1765
EL Rey	17 December 1765

Table 1. Departures of the packet boats from La Coruña to La Habana during the year 1765.

Sources: My own elaboration based on data from AGI, Correos, 469 B and AGI, Correos, 269 A – 276 B.

Inclement weather conditions were one of the main reasons for the delay in the departure of the ships. On numerous occasions the ships had to face strong storms at sea. These storms

caused serious damage to the ships, sometimes resulting in shipwrecks where passengers, goods, and correspondence could be lost.³¹ Additionally, in the European colonial empires, there was a regulation that provided for the throwing of correspondence into the sea in case of a sighting of an adversary ship. Sometimes it happened that the sailors on the packet boats saw a vessel that seemed to be a rival and threw the correspondence into the sea.³² Later, they would confirm that it was not a hostile vessel, but the mail had already been completely lost.³³ Other times the enemy intercepted the ship and captured the correspondence. The National Archives of the United Kingdom contain a large number of letters captured from Spanish ships by British vessels.³⁴ This captured correspondence reflects the interest that other colonial powers had in destabilising the postal dynamics of their enemies, and the strategic importance of capturing the information and cargo of other empires' ships.

The result of these inconveniences and threats from other European empires was that, on many occasions, the most significant correspondence was sent through different channels, either through Corunna or Cadiz. These successions of sending correspondence by different procedures indicate the awareness of the authorities of the importance of the correspondence arriving at its destination, whatever the route or method.

The Spanish Monarchy's postal reform project contained some changes with respect to the previous postal service: the fitting out of the port of Corunna as the main centre of departure for overseas correspondence to the detriment of that of Cadiz; the establishment of post offices located in the main Spanish American cities, which acted as intermediary institutions between the imperial and the local; and, the creation of new posts in Spanish America as administrators, financial controllers, and officers, who were responsible for coordinating the mail service.

Establishing post offices in strategic cities reflected the idea of a decentralised network of interconnected post offices throughout the territory of the Spanish monarchy.

These provisions constituted the postal system in a tentacular apparatus that extended throughout the Spanish American territory. Spain was able to draw on the British model of establishing post offices on the North American continent in the early seventeenth century; the first post office in the colonies was established in Boston in 1639. The intercolonial mail in British America was not expanded until the 1750s, however, when post offices multiplied and roads were improved and routes diversified, thanks to the work of Benjamin Franklin and William Hunter, appointed by the British Crown in 1753.³⁵ From 1757, they transformed the colonial postal system, making the postal service faster, more frequent, and covering a larger area.³⁶

Similarly, the new line of maritime posts for the Spanish maintained some features of the previous postal operation, such as the use of already consolidated maritime routes and points of destination previously used. This was the case with the port of Cartagena de Indias, which in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had already been considered as a preferred point on the commercial and postal routes of the Spanish Empire.

Cartagena de Indias as a polycentric postal node

The sea and its shores held a very important strategic value for the imperial states. The maritime area was a space for global interactions.³⁷ This research focuses on an Atlantic area where a large number of polycentric overseas connections operated.³⁸ These connections were not only unidirectional, with a trajectory from the metropolis to the colonies, but were also multidirectional, as they also took place between different areas, whether inter-colonial or extra-imperial.³⁹

In this overseas context, ports were spaces of contact between land and sea. They constituted an essential part of the development of these connections which took place on different scales. The ports were economic axes, military bases, communication hubs, and points of articulation, in which regional, imperial, and global economies were interconnected.

Communication was a distinctive and intrinsic feature of port spaces. It promoted contact between the domains of land and maritime circulation interwoven by local and global powers. It was also a transmitter of knowledge from different parts of the world. In fact, port cities were places where information was collected, used, debated, and redistributed. They became areas of political and socio-economic geostrategy that were essential for imperial power.

The Caribbean was at the centre of European political and economic rivalries and assumed a key role in geopolitical and trade strategies. This space was formed as a meeting place for global production and was configured as a fundamental space in the world economy.⁴⁰ From this point of view, Cartagena de Indias was a crucial city in the Caribbean space. Cartagena de Indias had been an organized space for the circulation of information since the establishment of the Carrera de Indias in the sixteenth century, since it was an obligatory stop in the Fleet and Galleon system.⁴¹ The Cartagena area was largely dominated by the development of Atlantic trade, which promoted the flow of news that was fundamental to the progress of the city.

The decision to place Cartagena de Indias as an authorized port in the Carrera de Indias, promoted by the Crown, conditioned its evolution and development. The commercial, financial, transport, and communication flows placed this city at the crucial node in the navigation routes between Europe and Spanish America and turned it into a fluid space of interaction.⁴² However, this system encountered different obstacles such as the lack of compliance with the regulations because the departure schedule of the ships was almost never respected, and there were even years in which no fleet set sail.⁴³ The insecurity caused by successive attacks by enemy ships and the increase in smuggling made contact between the two sides of the Atlantic increasingly difficult. For these reasons the government considered modifying the transport system to Spanish America.

The complex network that operated in the city of Cartagena de Indias explains why it became one of the main centres of operations within eighteenth-century Bourbon reformism. The goal behind state intervention was to revalue the geostrategic position of its ports through ideas and projects to improve the military infrastructure and to secure advances in communication and the progress of trade.

Once the postal reform project had been drawn up and regulated, it was consistently shaped and reshaped for application in the Spanish American space. The postal renovation project was not organized and did not have the same implications in all Spanish possessions in the Indies due to the plural and different constitution of Spanish American spaces. Consequently, the multiplicity and heterogeneity of peculiar features triggered diverse adaptations and configurations in each place where they were mutually constructed, in a constant imperial-local dialogue. In this context, the Cartagena de Indias post office, with its own characteristics, constituted an essential node in the imperial postal network and a space for negotiation of Bourbon policy.

In February 1765, the post office of Cartagena de Indias was established. It organized the circulation of multi-directional postal communication, this means, with the Peninsula, Havana, Cuba, the interior of South America, and even with the foreign powers that were in the Caribbean area. The postal institution became an essential pillar in the socio-economic and communication fields of postal reform.

The post office of Cartagena de Indias had a number of subordinate or aggregated post offices, which depended on it. They were in charge of the correspondence for the Spanish-American interior. This led to a planning of the postal territory establishing numerous post offices throughout the Spanish-American space. This implied a hierarchization of the land because the important thing was the space where the correspondence was distributed.

The Spanish Empire articulated the circulation of information on different scales. The aim was to integrate the territories into the imperial frameworks through the installation of fixed postal routes that communicated with different spaces. In this way, the postal service drew up postal routes, with departure and arrival points selected according to their geostrategic importance for the political and economic powers, with the intention of integrating various spaces in the Spanish-American interior around the articulation of imperial networks. These postal communication systems played a key role in the configuration of the territories.⁴⁴

The organization of the post was structured, therefore, around established time intervals and spaces for postal coordination and organization at different levels, imperial and local. The aim was to achieve these in order to establish a regularity in which the two rhythms were merged. However, local circumstances did not allow the times regulated by the instructions to be met, resulting in a continuous variation of travel times on the same routes.

From this point of view, it is necessary to think about distance and time in colonial society as a question of relative and flexible perspective, framed in certain socio-economic and political-cultural contexts that conditioned the governability of colonial empires. Distance depended on economic, social, and political needs that were changing and responded to particular circumstances and characteristics of the moment. In fact, the actors, their social interactions and attitudes and their practices were those that involved the dynamics of time. Therefore, the notion of efficiency and speed of the mail must be questioned, since these would be subordinated to the circumstances of the moment and the perception of time that the agents had.⁴⁵

Agents and strategies in the Cartagena postal network

The implementation of postal reform on the local Spanish-American territory presented

different challenges that required agents to use diverse strategies for the consolidation of the new postal model. The agents who participated in the transport of the mail on an official basis were the employees of the post offices: the drivers, who were in charge of transiting the postal routes, linking the key points of these routes, and carrying the mail under the licence of the postmaster; and the sailors who were in charge of the maritime postal service. They were agents of change that carried out the postal dynamics and were also intermediaries between the social and political spaces and the local and imperial ones.

The subordinate agents actively participated in the postal service. They mobilised the correspondence with the aim of achieving maximum efficiency and fluidity. This was the case with the postal drivers, who were generally the indigenous people who served as messengers, known as *chasquis*, in the Spanish-American interior.⁴⁶ The *chasquis* transported the mail and packages in an official or unofficial way, because they had excellent knowledge of the Spanish-American territory.⁴⁷ For this reason, the postal employees acted jointly with these agents to ensure the distribution of correspondence. Therefore, there was a strategy of integrating the natives to make the postal service more efficient in the interior regions. Other agents involved in the circulation of information were local authorities, merchants, the military, and religious orders. As a result, communication flowed through various channels, often unknown to the postal administration itself.⁴⁸

The geographical expansion of trade in the eighteenth century led to an increased demand for information from distant places on the part of traders.⁴⁹ This was the case in Cartagena de Indias, which was a strategic commercial hub. The merchants had an enormous need to establish fluid communication with Spain because of their economic interests. They needed to have precise market information, not only to master the supply and demand of European goods, but also to feed the interpersonal confidence required in long-distance

trade.⁵⁰ Consequently, the Atlantic trade networks were dependent on the letters that guaranteed the good progress or failure of their business.⁵¹

From this point of view, trust between the agents emphasised the role of solidarity links in social and economic networks due to the risk and uncertainties of colonial trade. Therefore, trust occupied a key place in the mentality of traders, who depended upon the action of trusted mediating agents to obtain information from long-distance markets.⁵² In this context, the postal network in Cartagena de Indias had access to privileged information about colonial markets. This allowed it to know the commercial circuits that were produced at short, medium, and long distance and to have a certain flexibility to adapt to the different economic situations.

Consequently, merchants often sought other means of circulating postal communication away from the official. They used their private boats, called registration ships, which had a direct connection between Cartagena de Indias and Spain. In this way these merchants did not have to stop in Cuba or comply with a rigid schedule like that of the Maritime Post Office. They were managed by an immediate postal service, with direct links to the ports, which could accommodate their commercial needs as dictated. These circumstances made their postal exchanges more efficient and explain why merchants preferred to send letters from Cartagena de Indias to Cadiz in their own ships where they anticipated a quicker response.⁵³ They established dense and fluid commercial channels and networks over which postal communication circulated. These postal networks were based on the needs, flexibility, speed, and trust between the different commercial agents installed in the multiple global mercantile nodes, all forming complex networks at a global level.⁵⁴ This reflects the close link between colonial trade and transatlantic communications.

To summarise, many agents did not use the official postal system, preferring to send their mail through private agents without a licence. These various unofficial communication

options, driven by particular interests, tended to be broader and more far-reaching. This situation was also found in other overseas empires where, as in the Spanish one, the transport of mail in private boats was cheaper and evaded government control. For example, two parallel communication networks coexisted in the overseas domains of the British Empire: the formal British postal service oriented towards a monopoly of the circulation of information; and an informal postal system that eluded the official one and operated through a huge network of connections in multiple spaces and through various agents.⁵⁵ Similarly, in the Portuguese Empire, many letters were sent by private vessels, such as the merchant ships.⁵⁶ This shows that these agents did not see positive advantages in an organised and regular structure established with state intervention.

The need to communicate according to each agent's own interests generated multiple channels and parallel actors to the official position. Most official correspondence was vertical. This means that communication was hierarchical, where local agents, especially postmasters and officials, reported to their superiors on postal matters.⁵⁷ This permanent flow of information to the political centre was not an indicator of increased power but, on the contrary, was a compensation for dominance, not a command in itself.⁵⁸

An examination of the horizontal communication reveals the role played by other actors in the flow of information. This was the case with local authorities, such as the governor and royal officials of the Royal Treasury of Cartagena de Indias. The Viceroy of New Granada, José Alfonso Pizarro, put them in charge of the postal order in 1750. An analysis of the documentation indicates that they continued to manage the circulation of information during the postal reform.⁵⁹ Thus, multiple agents competed for the control of postal information flows at different local and global levels.

In short, there was a multidirectional communication with horizontal relations, between peninsular authorities and their local employees, and vertical relations, between

authorities and other local agents, reflecting the existence of different communication modalities and situations in the postal network of Cartagena de Indias. The establishment of interpersonal postal links between multiple actors had a strong impact on the configuration of political spaces at a global and local level. This demonstrates the interplay between the different levels of authority within the postal system, where groups and institutions with different interests converged with a common objective: to establish effective postal communication.

Conclusion

“All ages have been the information age and, each in its own way, communication systems have always shaped events.”⁶⁰ With this concept, Robert Darnton presents communication systems as agents that shape societies in every historical period. Humans have always had the need to communicate with one another and, for this reason, governments have felt the need to organise the circulation of written information. The articulation of these postal needs by the European empires in the Early Modern Period allows reflection on a complex postal network.

Eighteenth-century projects to reform postal systems are related to the process of structuration and construction of imperial states. Colonial states required well-organised, fast, and efficient channels of communication to keep a tight hold over their possessions. An efficient postal system was key to compiling information, to ensuring that orders were enforced, and that commercial operations were not interrupted – the post was the basis of trade. In the eighteenth century, governments enacted numerous measures in order to control communication systems and institutionalise the post. In this regard, the postal system became a veritable agent of change, insofar as it consolidated the political authority of the empires and paved the way to the implementation of different policies in their territories through the consolidation of official communication channels.

However, these measures were different from place to place, and had to adapt to local circumstances. This undermined the idea of imperial control and made the ultimate aim, political centralisation, harder to achieve. This process rarely resulted in a direct and progressive increase of central power, leading instead to a widening of the margins for local action.

This research highlights processes in which the power and authority of the Bourbon monarchy were not imposed by force, but through negotiation with the interested parties in different decisional nodes throughout the empire. This is not to argue that the monarchy was weak, but that negotiation was part of normal government practice, including the reform of the postal system. As such, the alleged central model of the Bourbons was in fact dispersed throughout the complex polycentric mosaic of the Empire, resonating and proliferating in the multiple spaces into which the Empire was divided.

The terms of negotiation and conflict were the primary axes of the Spanish American postal system. This case study has emphasised the fact that this process did not take place along the classic lines of single centre and periphery, but that it was constructed of multiple power nodes. These not only included the administrative centres created by the Crown, but others as well, economic, military, cultural, and religious, which often shaped the decisions adopted with regard to the postal system.

Cartagena de Indias was one of those political nodes, and it soon turned into one of the most important information hubs in colonial Spanish America. In this space there were different actors who, in various situations, mobilised information through different dynamics and strategies, originating a process of re-articulation and decentralisation of the polycentric spheres of power.

The postal structure that revolved around Cartagena de Indias not only involved local but also global agents. These social groups faced the challenge of creating communication

networks, or thwarting them, as the circulation of information was one of the main population and territorial control tools. The Bourbon government did not control postal flows but was merely one agent among many. As such, the route to Cartagena de Indias did not act solely as an official route, but as an additional crank in a system, already complex, in which official and unofficial channels intermingled. This research shows the multi-layered power plays involving all the agents that tried to shape the direction of the postal reform project.

This paper thus argues for a polyhedric postal reform, that is, a reform with multiple interrelated faces in which a wide variety of agents operated, each one with their own strategy. The postal system in Cartagena de Indias was populated by different powers and interests, and included areas of convergence, conflict, and cooperation. Postal officials, whose task was to organise the distribution of the mail, involved the local authorities, such as the governor and royal officials, navy and army officers, and other social groups such as the clergy, the merchants, and the indigenous population groups. All of them had a stake in the distribution of the post, leading to points of confrontation and cooperation. The postal service was formed by different layers that interacted and overlapped at the local, regional, imperial, and global levels.

I also argue that the postal system played a central role in the configuration of imperial spaces, exercising its own agency. The postal administration was an autonomous agent capable of changing the socio-political and economic face of the empire. The postal system activated different actors and strategies that mobilised information, giving rise to a process of re-articulation of the spheres of power, which shaped the structure of the monarchy. The very dynamic local practices of the postal system, such as the routes and networks and connections, gave it a certain character of its own that differentiated it from the intentions of the Crown.

The idea of ascribing agency to institutions, specifically to the postal system, is original and controversial. Bruno Latour proposed the idea of agency to refer to the capacity for action of non-humans, for example, machines, institutions, buildings, and organisms. From this

approach, Latour suggested the existence of a plane of material relations between various aspects of the world, functioning as a whole. Therefore, he proposed the presence of many forces interacting and forming the state.⁶¹

Accordingly, Patrick Joyce stated the need to think about the state in terms of connectivity and one of the main elements that provides this connectivity are forms of communication, specifically the postal system that participates in the nature of the state. He argues that the daily operation of the postal system reflected the ordinariness of both the everyday state and daily life in the empire.⁶²

This research shows that this concept of agency can be usefully applied to state institutions, such as the postal system, since it can help to explain the role played by these institutions in the state's framework and the relationship between power, society, and empire. As such, this case study regards the postal services as actants. The idea is supported by the analysis of the postal administration in Cartagena de Indias, which included multiple entanglements of things and persons with human and non-human agency.

Notes

¹ Braudel, *El Mediterráneo*, 314.

² Brendecke, *Imperio e información*, 43–103.

³ See Le Roux, *Post Offices of Europe*; Raymond, *News Networks*.

⁴ See Banks, *Chasing Empire*.

⁵ See Steele, *English Atlantic*; Dierks, *In My Power*; Dubcovsky, *Informed Power*.

⁶ See Alcázar Molina, *Historia del correo*; Garay Unibaso, *Correos marítimos españoles*; López Bernal, *El correo marítimo colonial*; Moreno Cabanillas, *Cartas para gobernar*.

⁷ See Sobral Neto, *As comunicações*; Guapindaia, “Comunicação e poder”; Guapindaia, “Regulações centrais, práticas regionais.”

⁸ Zilliacus, *From Pillar to Post*, 78.

⁹ Paquette, “Enlightened Narratives,” 63.

¹⁰ See Brandtzaeg et al., *Travelling Chronicles*.

¹¹ See Vives, *Historia social y economía*; Domínguez Ortiz, *Carlos III y la España*.

Pietschmann, *Las reformas borbónicas*; Guimerá, *El reformismo borbónico*.

¹² See Paquette, *Enlightenment, Governance and Reform*; Kuethe and Andrien, *The Spanish Atlantic*; McFarlane, *War and Independence*.

¹³ See Eissa-Barroso, *The Spanish Monarchy*; Herrero Sánchez, “Spanish Theories of Empire.”

¹⁴ Report by Pedro Rodríguez Campomanes to the Postmasters General. Madrid, 10 July 1762. Archivo General de Indias (hereafter AGI), Correos, 462 B.

¹⁵ This monopoly of the postal service by the Crown would be confirmed by the legislation enacted during the reforms, especially the *Provisional Regulations of the Maritime Post from Spain to its West Indies*, and the *Royal Ordinance of the Maritime Post*. See Regulations of the Maritime Post from Spain to its West Indies. Madrid, 16 December 1764. AGI, Estado, 86, n. 8.; and Royal Ordinance of the Maritime Post. El Pardo, 26 January 1777. AGI, Correos, 430 B.

¹⁶ Letter from the Marquis of Grimaldi to the Postmasters General. San Ildefonso, 24 August 1764. AGI, Correos, 428 A.

¹⁷ After the suspension of the postal service between England and Spain, merchants continued to press for its re-establishment. They considered it essential for their trade relations with Spain and Portugal. Report by the postmasters-General Ja [James] Craggs [the elder] and [Charles] Cornwallis to [Secretary James] Craggs [the younger; Secretary of State, Southern Department], 20 March 1719. National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter TNA), State Paper Office, 35/15/111.

¹⁸ See Beck, *A History of the Falmouth*; Mejide Pardo, *Correos marítimos*.

¹⁹ The packet boats were the ships in charge of the postal maritime service for the transport of correspondence, but they could also carry passengers and goods. They originated in the seventeenth century, on a ship carrying mail between Calais (France) and Dover (England), which was named Packet-Boat, and which was transferred to Spain under the name *Paquebote*. Garay Unibaso, *Correos marítimos españoles*, 57.

²⁰ Some of the goods transported by the ships from Spain to Spanish America were wine from Catalonia, flour, nuts from Asturias, socks, hats, olives, hemp, glass glasses, shoes, boots, crockery, iron, and many others of different kinds. Conversely, the ships that went from the Indies to Spain brought goods such as mahogany, cocoa from Guayaquil, logwood from Campeche, leather, tobacco, and sugar. News of goods transported from Corunna to Havana and viceversa, 1766. AGI, Indiferente General, 1586.

²¹ Regulations of the Maritime Post from Spain to its West Indies, 1764. Archivo General de la Nación de Colombia (hereafter AGNC), Colonia, Correos, Cundinamarca, Tomo 1, Documento 65.

²² For example, Manuel de Zulueta and Juan Ángel de Olavarrieta's merchant company signed a contract with the postal service on 22 January 1768, to introduce a specific amount of flour in each monthly mail to Havana. However, these merchants shipped flour on private vessels whose cargoes they arranged themselves. Manuel de Zulueta and Juan Ángel de Olavarrieta to the Postmasters General. Madrid, 7 August 1770. AGI, Correos, 429 A.

²³ The Royal Officers to the Marquis of Grimaldi. Campeche, 4 May 1765. AGI, Indiferente General, 1587.

²⁴ The postmaster of Corunna José Antonio López to the Postmasters General. Corunna, 6 December 1769. AGI, Correos, 464.

²⁵ The Postmaster General to the Marquis of Croix. Madrid, 10 April 1765. AGI, Correos, 390 B.

²⁶ The postmaster of Corunna José Antonio López to the Postmasters General. Corunna, 12 November 1768. AGI, Correos, 464. 1.

²⁷ For the opposition, in both Spain and Spanish America, to the postal reform, see Moreno Cabanillas, “A Global Postal Service,” 94–111.

²⁸ The Postmasters General to the Marquis of Grimaldi. Madrid, 1764. AGI, Correos, 428 A.

²⁹ The Marquis of Grimaldi to the Postmasters General. San Lorenzo, 21 October 1767. AGI, Correos, 429 A; The Postmasters General to the Marquis of Grimaldi. Madrid, 1 February 1771. AGI, Correos, 429 B.

³⁰ Araneda Riquelme, *Un gobierno de papel*.

³¹ The Viceroy of New Spain Antonio Bucareli to Julián de Arriaga. Mexico, 30 October 1771. AGI, Indiferente General, 1587.

³² Instruction to the Packetboats destined for the Post Service. Madrid, 24 August 1764. AGI, Estado, 86 A, n. 6.

³³ José Antonio Pando to the Viceroy of New Granada Pedro Mesía de la Cerda. Cartagena de Indias, 20 November 1769. AGI, Correos, 69 A.

³⁴ Captured ship: San Francisco Xavier alias La Perla, Don Josef Perez Muenta master (José Pérez de Muenta) (former master Don Melchor de Alarcón), 29 October 1779. TNA, High Court of Admiralty, 30/275.; and Captured ship: San Francisco Xavier alias La Perla, Don Josef Perez Muenta master (José Pérez de Muenta) (former master Don Melchor de Alarcón), 29 October 1779. TNA, High Court of Admiralty, 30/276. The correspondence intercepted was generally private letters related to the commercial sphere. Xabier Lamikiz analyses this correspondence captured by the British Empire through the case of the Spanish merchant ship called *San Francisco Xavier La Perla*. See Lamikiz, 2010.

³⁵ Benjamin Franklin and William Hunter designed instructions on the convenient method of operation of the postal service for postmasters. These regulations were circulated to post offices in the British colonies in America, for example, *Post Office Instructions and Directions, 1753*. See Labaree, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 161–177.

³⁶ Lemay, *Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 627.

³⁷ Martínez Shaw, “La historia marítima,” 71.

³⁸ For a discussion of the history and an extended analysis on polycentric monarchies see Cardim et al., *Polycentric Monarchies*; Herrero Sánchez, “The Business Relations”; Grafe, “Polycentric States”; Pérez García and De Sousa, *Global History and New Polycentric Approaches*.

³⁹ Gruzinski, *Las cuatro partes del mundo*, 81.

⁴⁰ Vidal Ortega, *Cartagena de Indias*, 20.

⁴¹ Haring, *El comercio y la navegación*, 251–254.

⁴² See Meléndez, “Negotiating Subjectivities.”

⁴³ From 1697 to 1721 only three fleets arrived in Spanish America. In fact, from 1697 to 1706 no fleet arrived in Cartagena de Indias. Castillo Mathieu, *Llave de las Indias*, 16, and 92.

⁴⁴ For the overland routes from Cartagena de Indias, see Stangl, “Los correos terrestres.”

⁴⁵ Uribe, *Las dinámicas del tiempo*, 110–114.

⁴⁶ The origin of the *chasquis* is in the culture of the Incas. The *chasquis* were the messengers who moved through Inca territory carrying messages in the pre-Hispanic postal system. Vega, *Antología de los comentarios reales*, 249–251. The word *chasqui* evolved into a generalization since after the postal reform this concept was used to designate any indigenous, black, or mestizo mail driver until the first years of the nineteenth century.

⁴⁷ See González Martínez, “De los chasquis.”

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- ⁴⁸ The Postmasters General to the Marquis of Grimaldi. Madrid, 16 March 1774. AGI, Correos, 213 A.
- ⁴⁹ Trivellato, “Merchants Letters,” 81.
- ⁵⁰ Lamikiz, *Trade and Trust*, 95.
- ⁵¹ Rueda Ramírez, “La Cultura Escritura,” 63.
- ⁵² See Lamikiz, *Trade and Trust*; Lamikiz, “Social capital, networks and trust.”
- ⁵³ The Postmaster of Cartagena de Indias Manuel de Valbuena to the Postmasters General. Cartagena de Indias, 15 December 1765. AGI, Correos, 69 A.
- ⁵⁴ On commercial networks in the Iberian empires at a transnational and global level, see Hausberger and Ibarra, *Redes y negocios globales*; Herrero Sánchez, “The business relations.”
- ⁵⁵ Adelman, “A Constitutional Conveyance,” 714.
- ⁵⁶ See Guapindaia, “Entre correios marítimos.”
- ⁵⁷ Letters, files and accounts of the Post Office of Cartagena de Indias, 1764–1770. AGI, Correos, 69 A–74 A.
- ⁵⁸ Brendecke, *Imperio e información*, 489.
- ⁵⁹ Notes on the movement of the mail. Cartagena de Indias, 1751–1782. AGNC, Colonia, Correos, Bolívar, Tomo 2, Documento 8.
- ⁶⁰ Darnton, “Una de las primeras sociedades,” 371.
- ⁶¹ See Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.
- ⁶² See Joyce, *The State of Freedom*.

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