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Mail concessions for a global empire: *correos mayores* in the Spanish Empire in America (1514-1620)¹

Concesiones de correo para un imperio global: los correos mayores dentro del Imperio español en América (1514-1620)

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Abstract:

The nature of mail concessions awarded to private parties in order to enable the distribution of information within the Spanish Empire in the sixteenth century is examined. I propose the hypothesis that several versions of mail concessions coexisted within the Spanish Empire. Likewise, I question the notion that these mail concessions were intended to gain monopoly control. The analysis concentrates on *correos mayores*, through which contracts were negotiated and entered into with the crown for the rights to distribute correspondence in several communication epicenters. By means of a comparison between the situations in Sevilla, the Royal Court, Mexico, and Guatemala, the article shows that “gifts” by various means, as well as auctions, were the main models for allocating mail concessions.

Keywords: Correos mayores, postal agents, concessions, colonial mail, communication.

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Resumen:

El presente artículo examina la naturaleza de las concesiones de correos, entregadas a algunos particulares para hacer posible la distribución de información dentro del imperio español durante el siglo XVI. Como hipótesis propongo que dentro del imperio español coexistieron diferentes versiones de las concesiones de correos. Así mismo cuestiono la idea de que las concesiones tenían intenciones monopolísticas. El eje del análisis serán los *correos mayores*, quienes negociaron y contrataron con la corona el derecho a distribuir la correspondencia hacia epicentros comunicativos. A partir de la comparación entre casos como el de Sevilla, la Corte Real, México y Guatemala el texto demuestra que la “donación” por diferentes vías y la subasta fueron los principales modelos de asignación de las concesiones de correos.

Palabras clave: Correos mayores, agentes postales, concesiones, correo colonial, comunicación.

Recent research studies have analyzed the function and structure of American mail during the sixteenth century. Such studies have shown that the mail system in Spanish America was not particularly restrictive for users³. For instance, vassals could send and receive correspondence without there being any regulation that forbade communication exchanges. In fact, multiple official and unofficial options coexisted to distribute correspondence within Spanish possessions. In the same vein, such contributions have shown that the Spanish crown did not intend to create public postal companies during the sixteenth century. This policy is in contrast to the actions undertaken after 1720, when Spanish authorities decided to establish “postal administrations”, to be directly controlled by their officials (Moreno; Araneda).

From 1514 to 1768, the Spanish crown appointed a number of offices to be classified as *correo mayor* concessions. Their main task was the communication between Castilian authorities and some vassals with whom government institutions exchanged information. In fact, *correos mayores* were accountable for the communication between royal councils, *audiencias*, fiscal institutions, and certain private parties. These logistics were funded by the Treasury without the need to create enterprises directly managed by the crown⁴. To some extent, it was a rather practical alternative, considering the ever-present challenge for communication in an expanding empire ruled from a distance.

3 For instance, (González, “Communicating an Empire”; González, “Comunicarse a pesar de la distancia”; Vallejo García-Hevia)

4 “Real Cédula ordenando a Diego de la Haya el pago de 1200 ducados a Mafeo de Tassis, correo mayor”, 1534, AGI, *Indiferente* 422, leg. 16, ff. 147 v-148 r.

This article analyzes different expectations and conditions under which the crown established *correo mayor* concessions in America. As a hypothesis, I maintain that *correos mayores* established a postal service that had the goal of satisfying official institutions' communication needs, especially those more directly related to the court of Castile. In Spanish America, mail concessions tended to prioritise communication between *audiencias* and other corporations made up of Spaniards. Likewise, I will argue that there is no evidence for conceiving *correos mayores* to be agents of a public or monopolistic nature. Instead, mail concessions were not intended to monopolize the distribution of personal, commercial, or ecclesiastical correspondence. Finally, I will maintain that this postal scheme was developed only in certain cities and not programmatically throughout the empire.

That said, the subject of mail concessions has been very little explored. In general, the attention it has received is quite superficial. For instance, notable writings such as those by John H. Elliott and Geoffrey Parker have highlighted the "logistical difficulties" in the circulation of information within the Spanish Empire (Elliott 174; Parker 47–76). Such statements have been replicated by several historians, who have assumed communication in the large Castilian and Indian territories always occurred under the same conditions. As a result, communication between Europe and the Indies is still perceived, on principle, as disorganized, slow, and ineffective. Overall, there has been no room for any other interpretations, nor for the intention to test the soundness of these assumptions. Furthermore, neither has it been possible to distinguish between the different places and people that participated in the circulation of information in Spanish America.

Historiography dealing with mail has not been characterized by an interest in comparative analysis. Influential researchers like Cayetano Alcázar, María Montañez, and Walter Bosé did not make the connection between the many versions of *correo mayor* concessions a priority in their research (Bosé, "Los orígenes" 242-79; Bosé, "Orígenes del correo"; Montañez 43-45; Alcazar 75). So far, the history of mail has been addressed solely through monographs⁵. Specialized literature has assumed that mail concessions worked similarly in every imperial area, which has happened partly because historians dedicated to the sixteenth century have not made extensive use of the resources available worldwide.

In the first part of this article I will address the emergence of mail concessions in Castile beginning in the late fifteenth century. This case will be evidence for

5 Nonetheless, José María Vallejo has made a commendable effort to collect legal documents. See (Vallejo).

proposing that the appointment of certain offices responded to a policy implemented by several European kingdoms. In the second part, I will look into the concession of the *Correo Mayor de la Casa de Contratación de Sevilla* and will discuss why this is the antecedent of the first *correo mayor* in Spanish America.

Moreover, analysing the situation in the Viceroyalty of New Spain and the Kingdom of Guatemala will allow me to argue that the mechanisms to appoint mail concessions changed throughout the sixteenth century. As a matter of fact, after 1560 most of these positions were appointed by means of auctions and sales, and not as “gifts” (or “*donaciones puras y perfectas*”) from the king. It will then be possible to compare this process to the one analysed in the first two parts of the article, where the main focus will be on concessions for which there was no need to pay. This paper will clarify the reasons that justified the establishment of the first mail concession in Spanish America into the debate. I also hope that the analysis helps to rethink why *correos mayores* represented an essential strategy in the global expansion process of the Spanish Empire.

A European trend

Since the end of the fifteenth century, official mail circulated in Europe thanks to various unofficial and private agents. In fact, after 1450 the most important kingdoms in Europe appointed an individual or a collective to coordinate postal distribution processes. In the Holy Roman Empire, Emperor Maximilian I conferred a mail concession on the Von Taxis family, so that they coordinated official mail distribution between the royal court and some European cities of importance (Behringer, *Thurn und Taxis* 8–23; Ohmann 84–171; Behringer, “Empereur, Diète d’Empire et Poste (1490-1615)”). Over the years, this position was known by the name of *Obristen Postmaister* (Damler 300). Among the privileges allocated to this private agent was the possibility to move freely across several European kingdoms, bear arms, and have access to horse rental at reduced prices.

The Spanish government continued this trend and placed their trust in the same family collective that operated in the Holy Empire, and toward the end of 1501, Francis Von Taxis already served as *correo mayor* in the Castilian court (Montañez 46). Taxis faced the challenge of coordinating the information flow to and from the place where the Spanish king resided (Bosé, “Organización del correo en España”). The suitability of this family lay in their experience in trade circulation in regions such as Brussels, Innsbruck, Tirol, and other cities in central Europe.

In general, historians have interpreted these changes as an attempt to monopolise mail (Schobesberger et al.). In a valuable recent compilation text, Jay Caplan has supported this idea with great vigour (Caplan 38–67). In parallel, other outstanding contributions like the one by Philip Beale have defined these postal systems as “national” and public in nature (Beale 164). Authors like Renate Pieper and Andrew Pettegree have established direct links between the intense circulation of news during the sixteenth century and the alleged creation of postal collectives of an imperial nature (Pettegree 19–38; Pieper 185–226). However, the evidence to prove that there were postal monopolies in Europe and America in the early modern world is insufficient. In my judgment, the process of appointing mail concessions (with a view to guaranteeing the circulation of official information) has been confused with an interest in monopolising.

As a consequence of this interpretation, historiography is still unable to explain why there coexisted multiple unofficial channels of postal distribution in the modern world and why they were not considered illegal. Indeed, it is a fact that serious restrictions were not imposed in Europe on private transport of information. Furthermore, correspondence that was not distributed by official agents was not reported as smuggling. To speak of a “monopoly” in the sixteenth century, authorities would have had to make concessions such as *correos mayores* the only market option. For my part, let me put forward two propositions in order to address this important historiographical problem: 1) assuming mail concessions had a more limited scope than that usually attributed to them; and 2) proposing that European kingdoms were unable to prevent the existence of unofficial mechanisms for mail distribution.

Furthermore, it cannot be overemphasised that mail distribution by private means was widely allowed in modern Europe. For example, during the Early Middle Ages the *messageries universitaires* rendered an unofficial postal service in several European capital cities (Destemberg; Hacke). Such privileges went hand in hand with the publishing revolution which took place in Europe after the thirteenth century (Bertrand 21–27). Likewise, other postal figures such as *hostes* and *maestros de postas* were tested in the medieval Castilian world (AGS, C 4, 156, 4, f. 1 r.)⁶. These individuals were in charge of redistributing mail from the main cities and of choosing reliable messengers. In their overseas possessions, Europeans continued with the principle of the non-prohibition of any postal distribution mechanism.

6 “Orden a Alonso de Morales, tesorero, para que entregue a Juan Ruiz de Olosa, hoste de correos”, 1500, AGS, *Cámara de Castilla*, cédulas 4, 156, 4, f. 1r.

The *correo mayor* of the Kingdom of Castile's primary responsibility was to manage the communication of the king's court. As this was such an itinerant institution (at least until 1560), the workplace depended on the place of the king's residency. For this reason, the king advocated for the kingdom's *correos mayores* to have at their disposal a number of assistants or *hostes*, who coordinated the exchange of written information (AGS, C 9, 160, 5)⁷. This meant that *correos mayores* could operate from a distance if they wanted to. Likewise, this structure was useful for connecting Spain with other European kingdoms. It is well known that chancellors, priests, and nobles used services rendered by the Taxis family. For example, celebrated cardinal Perrenot de Granvella's missives circulated from France thanks to the messengers that worked for the *correo mayor*⁸.

In exchange for their service, the kingdom's *correos mayores* received an amount agreed upon with royal authorities (usually annually). In 1517, for instance, Charles V agreed to the payment of 6,500 ducats for the annual distribution of mail between Castile, Flanders, the Holy Empire, and France.⁹ As part of their main service, *correos mayores* were also responsible for having horses ready, bags to protect mail, and supplying the material logistics necessary to carry out the transport of correspondence under good conditions.

During the first part of the sixteenth century, mail concessions that were independent from the Taxis family collective were also appointed. For instance, Seville had a separate *correo mayor* position charged with managing the transport of correspondence produced in the highest court of justice and the government (the *Audiencia*) (Mirman 16). Something similar happened sometime later in the city of Toledo, where there was another mail concession independent from those of the Taxis¹⁰. In order to avoid overlapping and cost overruns, contracts attempted to determine each *correo mayor*'s jurisdiction¹¹. Even though there were still conflicts, this strategy allowed establishing a double communication channel in cities with an abundant production of correspondence.

7 "Que nadie ose despachar correo", 1504, AGS, *Cámara de Castilla*, cédulas 9, 160, 5.

8 "Carta del Cardenal Granvella a Tassis", 1557, BPRM, *Cartas del Cardenal Granvella*, II/2549, ff. 1r.-3v.

9 "Traslado del asiento con Baptista y Maffeo de Tassis", 1517, AGS, *Contaduría Mayor de Cuentas*, 1.ª época, 313, 1.

10 "Ejecutoria del pleito litigado por Antonio de Figueroa correo mayor de Toledo", 1579, ARCV, *Registro de ejecutorias*, caja 1401, 31.

11 On how to define these contracts, see "Carta de nombramiento de Correo Mayor para todo el reino de Navarra", 1572, ARCV, *Pergaminos*, cajas 7 y 3.

By 1510, an important amount of correspondence about the New World already circulated in Spain. In particular, Andalusia was an important centre for production and redistribution of information about the New World, a process which was encouraged by the foundation of Casa de la Contratación de Indias in 1503. Furthermore, this institution gradually became a mandatory stop for all documents that arrived from or departed to the Indies. Such a communication flow was the main reason the Crown of Castile decided on the approval of appointing a *correo mayor* position for overseas islands and territories in America¹². Thus in 1514, the first Correo Mayor de las Indias was appointed, Casa de la Contratación being its operative centre. This is why in many cases this position was also known as Correo Mayor de la Casa de la Contratación.

Essentially, the Spanish government sought to create a special service to coordinate distribution of correspondence related to the Spanish American colonies' matters (*asuntos indianos*). In the same fashion as had occurred with the Taxis, the need to guarantee the safety of the communications of official institutions prevailed. Lorenzo Galíndez de Carvajal, one of the most prominent jurists at the end of the fifteenth century, was appointed to carry out this task¹³. He was appointed the Correo Mayor de las Indias position in perpetuity. As a result of this condition, Galíndez and his family were able to enjoy this privilege indefinitely, which was appointed as a "gift" from the king for the services rendered by Galíndez to the court.

Historians have frequently identified the creation of this position as an attempt to establish a postal system within (and for) the Indies. However, the evidence encourages us to reconsider this idea¹⁴. The contract for the concession appointed in 1514 (and its endorsement in 1525) did not entail the establishment of postal offices in the Indies¹⁵. The *correo mayor* did not have to live in America, either. This explains why the *correo mayor* position could be exercised from Europe¹⁶. In the New World (and particularly maritime spaces), correspondence would continue being carried by private agents, independent from *correos mayores*.

12 "Título Correo Mayor de Indias", 1514, AGI, *Patronato*, 170, ramo 18.

13 In addition to being a jurist, Lorenzo Galíndez was a chronicler of the Catholic Monarchs. One of his emblematic works can be found in "Memorial o registro breve de los lugares donde el Rey y la Reina Católicos", 1501, BNE, MSS/1691, ff. 1r.-113v.

14 In my view, this idea is not made explicit in synthesis texts. See, for example, (Vallejo)

15 "Sobrecédula de Don Carlos y Doña Juana", 1525, AGI, *Indiferente*, 420, leg. 10, ff. 133r.-137v.

16 "Justicia a Lorenzo Galíndez de Carvajal", 1524, AGI, *Indiferente*, 420, leg. 10, ff. 45r.-46r.

A concession created for the West Indies

The Correo Mayor de Indias position was filled by several descendants of the Galíndez de Carvajal family. Around ten people in total served as *correo mayor* between 1514 and 1768 (the year in which the crown negotiated the termination of these concessions). In the first decades of operation, the main problem was sending West Indies information with messengers from the Audiencia of Seville. Theoretically, these two services were independent. Correos Mayores de Indias protested against these practices, because their annual income depended on the number of deliveries. Casa de la Contratación's officials, for their part, could point out the Galíndez family had no messengers available for ordinary and extraordinary services¹⁷. Nevertheless, the crown did not withdraw its support for *correos mayores*, which had been appointed despite criticism.

The appointment of private postal agents underwent a significant variation in the mid-sixteenth century, with the arrival of a descendant of the Carvajal family in Peru. In 1559, Diego de Carvajal Vargas y Dávila (Lorenzo Galíndez' son) was appointed by the king to serve as attorney in the *encomiendas* renegotiation process carried out in Peru¹⁸. However, Diego de Carvajal died shortly after his arrival in Peru. Such a loss represented a challenge, since there were precise instructions in his will to divide the correo mayor position into two parts. One was to be exercised by his eldest son, who lived in Seville (Juan de Carvajal Vargas y Sotomayor), and the other by one of his younger sons, who lived in Lima (Diego de Carvajal Vargas y Sotomayor)¹⁹. The situation was crucial for communication in America, because the functions of Correo Mayor de Indias and Correo Mayor de la Casa de la Contratación were legally separated starting in 1562.

As a product of this division, the Correo Mayor de Indias position went through a period of turmoil in the New World and in Spain. Considering his experience in the transportation of goods, the merchant Marcos Correoso made a bid for the Correo Mayor de Lima position around 1560. Nonetheless, in less than two years the Council of the Indies denied this request, because it was "contrary to law" and

17 "Pleito seguido por Pedro Ruíz, teniente de correo mayor de las Indias, con Cristóbal de Gangas, correo mayor de la ciudad de Sevilla", 1531, AGI, *Justicia*, 705, n.º 7.

18 In America, *encomiendas* constituted privileges over the land and labour of indigenous people. *Encomiendas* were originally appointed in perpetuity to the first Spanish settlers in America. However, over the years, the Castilian government decided to renegotiate the terms of this privilege.

19 See 'Pedro de Oyarte [Oyararte] contra Rodrigo Jerez', 1564, AGI, *Justicia*, 792, n.º 5.

because it violated the commitments acquired by the Carvajal family²⁰. In a similar vein, in Spain, Rodrigo de Jerez (Correo Mayor de Sevilla) was highly critical of the operation of the Correo Mayor de Indias concession. To express his dissatisfaction, he filed a strongly worded petition before the Casa de la Contratación's authorities, in which he requested that the titled property be restructured. Jerez proposed that *correos* in Seville and the Indies be administrated by only one person, who in this case would be he himself²¹. With respect to the jurisprudence relating to Peru, Castilian judges were unwilling to modify the nature of the concession. This shows that during the second half of the sixteenth century, several private parties were interested in taking on *correo mayor* positions.

Until that time, private parties paid to obtain *correo mayor* positions. Nevertheless, in 1570 the crown consented to Juan de Vargas y Carvajal's selling of the Correo Mayor de la Casa de la Contratación position. The buyer was Juan de Saavedra, who, in turn, sold it to Rodrigo Jerez, Correo Mayor de Sevilla²². Contrary to what had happened earlier, at this time it was the concession owners who decided to sell it. The price of the position increased progressively in the following six decades, from 2 300 ducats to 10 000 ducats, that is, more than fourfold. The position came with privileged access to Indian information, so powerful Castilian families had a vested interest in buying it. In 1628, the concession was acquired by the powerful favourite Count-Duke of Olivares, the most important political figure in the kingdom after the king²³.

During the second half of the sixteenth century, the Spanish government persisted in favouring the usefulness of the mail concessions model. However, this did not mean that users found fewer possibilities to access other private services. The appetite for the *entera noticia* that characterized Philip II's Spain (1556–1598) could not spare the advantages of combining distribution logistics²⁴. To this end, the system had to be flexible. For instance, it is known that communication between Madrid and distant places was only minimally mediated by *correos mayores*. This is reported in a set of letters sent from Cebu (Philippines) to Mexico and then

20 'Pleito entre Diego de Carvajal y Marcos Correoso', 1563, AGI, *Justicia*, 434, n.º 2, ramo 4.

21 'Petición de Rodrigo de Jerez', 1563, AGI, *Justicia*, 792, n.º 5, pieza 1.

22 "Residencia tomada a Juan de Saavedra, correo mayor de S. M. en Sevilla y su tierra; a su teniente, Rodrigo de Jerez, que usa del oficio, y a sus oficiales", 1575, AGS, *Consejo Real de Castilla*, 208, 1.

23 "Real provisión confirmando y aprobando la venta hecha por Fernando De Medina y Mendoza al Conde-Duque De Sanlúcar", 1628, AGI, *Indiferente*, 433, leg. 3, ff. 259v.-260r.

24 This issue has been remarkably explored in (Brendecke 103-122).

to Madrid.²⁵ The journey from Cebu to Mexico was covered by a travelling bureaucrat, the journey from Mexico to Veracruz by private messengers, the journey from Veracruz to Seville by merchant ships, and, presumably, only the journey from Seville to Madrid was covered by Correo Mayor de Indias agents.

During the last decades of the sixteenth century, there was a remarkable increase in the circulation of messengers with Spanish American correspondence throughout the peninsular territory. Historiography has disregarded Castilian messengers, who also made up part of the Indian postal circuit. From Seville, the Andalusian ports, and the court (or vice versa), one or more messengers could be dispatched every day with mail concerning American matters. In such an area, it is likely that a group of half a dozen recurring messengers was formed. In 1516, a messenger was awarded four ducats for a horseback ride between Seville and Madrid, at the rate of twenty leagues per day (approximately 96 km)²⁶. These figures remained relatively stable until the seventeenth century, and they were valid for one or two letter chests, apart from the hiring of horses²⁷. When it comes to the transportation of all the mail that arrived with a Fleet of the Indies convoy, the costs could be substantially greater. In 1611, the Casa de la Contratación was authorized to pay 28560 maravedis for a journey between Barrameda and Madrid²⁸. In this case, the correspondence came from New Spain, and it weighed nearly three or four present-day tons.

To guarantee that *correos mayores* fulfilled their responsibilities, the crown decided to issue certain “ordinances” for specific matters. This type of document was a complement to the contracts. In 1580, a well-known ordinance was signed. It specified the way in which the Correo Mayor de Indias had to deal with some redistribution points (*postas*) and regulated the price of the hiring of horses per day (two pesos each)²⁹. The requirement that these provisions be complied with by Correos Mayores de Indias also allowed the sustainability of a model with limitations, which was criticized by its users in spite of the crown’s support.

25 “Carta oficiales de Filipinas a Audiencia de México”, 1565, AGI, *Patronato*, 23, ramo 24.

26 “Orden de pago a Domingo de Aguirre”, 1516, AGI, *Indiferente*, 419, leg. 6, ff. 490r.-490v.

27 According to our calculations, some horses might have carried around two hundred kilos in a single trip.

28 “Orden de pago”, 1611, AGI, *Indiferente*, 428, leg. 34, ff. 25v.-26r.

29 “Ordenanzas para el oficio de correo”, 1580, AGI, *Indiferente*, 1956, leg. 3, ff. 84v.-87r.

The evolution of the first great mail concession established for the Indies and its later division allows us to highlight several important aspects of the mutations that characterized this type of position. The exposition we have carried out so far not only aims to show how the *Correo Mayor de Indias* had corresponding peninsular and Indian positions, but also to emphasise the plethora of private figures who were responsible for postal distribution in America. In the next section, we will focus on the process that led to the sale of mail concessions in New Spain and Guatemala, two concessions that had jurisdiction over a vast territory that is now part of North and Central America.

New Spain and new mail concessions in the Indies

Historians have frequently overlooked the *correo mayor* figure's trajectory in America and have failed to reflect on this phenomenon. In general, it has been assumed that the concession appointed to the Carvajal family was the only one related to the New World. Nonetheless, we will see that there were other types of private concessions in Spanish American possessions. I am particularly interested in considering the *correo mayor* position in Mexico and Guatemala, which incorporated important variations in the way in which private parties were assigned to the distribution of correspondence. In fact, mail concessions in New Spain and Guatemala were autonomous from other concessions appointed in Castile, and this process was carried out by means of auctions.

In the north of America, the *Correos Mayores de Indias* chose not to get involved in activities linked to the distribution of information. The lack of alliances for holding the position, the unfamiliarity with the kingdom, and the idea that Peru was the most promising possession of the empire could have discouraged the Carvajales from striving for the exercise of this part of the concession. As a matter of fact, there is no record that Diego de Carvajal or his descendants took any legal action to serve as *correo mayor* in the Viceroyalty of New Spain or the Guatemala's governorate. At least until 1576, no *correo mayor* managed the distribution of correspondence within these territories in the north of the continent.

Mexico City was notorious for being a mandatory redistribution centre for overseas correspondence that was sent to or produced in the *Audiencias* of Guatemala and Guadalajara. This circuit was connected to Acapulco, the official distribution port *par excellence*. Eventually, *navíos de aviso* (the vessels that carried mail with the Fleet of the Indies since 1566) would be authorized to go ashore in another

port in the event of attacks or breakdowns³⁰. However, the viceroys promoted the use of the most heavily guarded routes in order to prevent smuggling and have better control of messengers. Besides, as an archiepiscopal seat, Mexico City also received and produced a huge number of ecclesiastical documents³¹.

That said, at different times of the sixteenth century, the *Audiencias* of Guadalajara, Guatemala, and several municipal governments highly criticised postal agents located in the Mexican capital, especially for the opening and undue retention of mail. Likewise, there were total losses caused by shipwrecks or assaults on messengers. In extreme situations, Guatemalan officers decided to send correspondence via Panama instead of Mexico City, as was customary³². Such practices prompted the use of protocols and formalities to verify that information could transit under reliable conditions. For example, in 1564 the treasurer and the accountant of New Galicia, on their own initiative, created an extensive inventory of accounting correspondence produced during their tenure³³. The reason was none other than the retention and loss of a diverse group of documents in Mexico City.

The possibility of establishing a *correo mayor* position in New Spain began to materialise toward 1576. A decade before, viceroy Gaspar de Peralta had offered an apology to King Philip II for not sending news about the war against the Chichimec Indians. On that occasion, the highest authority in New Spain blamed the lack of an effective communication channel for his “silence”³⁴. Certainly the initiative to establish a mail concession in New Spain did come from the Spanish bureaucracy that resided in Mexico. In general, Castilian people who worked in official Mexican institutions during the sixteenth century welcomed the establishment of an exclusive channel for sending government documents.

Ultimately, the final impetus for the establishment of a *correo mayor* position in New Spain was sponsored by Viceroy Martín Enríquez de Almanza (1568–1580). As an outcome of his previous experience in Castile, Enríquez was well aware of the possible advantages of appointing a specific private agent to manage the circulation of correspondence produced by Spanish bureaucrats. In addition, the support of Spanish merchants was essential. Indeed, businessmen were eager to improve

30 “Carta de Alonso de Sotomayor”, 1599, AGI, *Panamá*, 14, ramo 15, n.º 106.

31 “Relación de los procesos que se pudieron hallar en Guatemala”, 1567, AGNM, *Novohispano, Inquisición*, vol. 1 ‘A’, exp. 7, f. 1r.-v.

32 “Carta del rey Luis de Velasco”, 1564, AGI, *México*, 19, n.º 34

33 “Carta de oficiales reales”, 1564, AGI, *Guadalajara*, 33, n.º 3

34 “Carta del virrey Gastón Peralta”, 1567, AGI, *México*, 19, n.º 46.

communication with Castilian authorities and the king, who legislated on many transactions in America. Viceroy Enríquez himself remarked to King Philip II that Spanish merchants “han andado tras de mí” to arrange the appointment of a *correo mayor*.³⁵ In this regard, I posit that Spanish merchants did not expect to improve communication as a whole, but rather to use mail concessions in their favour.

In opposition, the other side of the proposal was represented by non-Spanish sectors. In a letter of which there are several copies, the Mexico City Cabildo expressed its rejection of the possibility of establishing a *correo mayor* position³⁶. From the perspective of politicians and merchants born in Mexico, the establishment of an “official” postal option could jeopardise the free communication of private sectors. The document sent by the Cabildo represented strong opposition to the possibility of conferring a mail concession³⁷. Such evidence allows us to consider that collectives such as the Mexican Cabildo were of the view that mail in New Spain should remain in the hands of several unregulated private agents. It is also possible to take note of the fact that several sectors were aware of the disadvantages of establishing monopolies and forcing vassals to communicate only through *correos mayores*.

In historiographical terms, there are no records of any analysis of the opposition and support brought about by the processes of establishing *correo mayor* concessions. The trend has been to assess their emergence as part of the government projects of the Spanish Empire, without examining the participation of local sectors. Historians have assumed that the innovation of mail concessions represented in New Spain was approved in Spain and accepted in America without any controversy whatsoever³⁸. The evidence, however, shows a completely different phenomenon. At least in this one incident, authorities set up in Spain acted as mediators and legitimisers of a transformation that was first proposed in Indian possessions.

Thus, by the end of the 1570's, the idea of establishing a *correo mayor* position was approved by the highest Spanish authorities who resided in New Spain. Backed by this support, in 1576 Viceroy Enríquez established a *de facto* kind of concession to coordinate the circulation of official correspondence in Mexico City. It was not a *correo mayor* position *stricto sensu*, but a privilege that enabled a private individual to handle the distribution of official information between the capital of

35 “Carta del virrey”, 1569, AGI, *México*, 19, n.º. 90.

36 “Petición del Cabildo”, 1582, AGI, *México*, 1091, leg10, f. 65r.

37 See (“Communicating an Empire” 22).

38 Bosé, “Orígenes del correo terrestre en México. Los Correos Mayores (1579-1765)”.

New Spain and other cities such as Oaxaca, Puebla, Veracruz, and Guadalajara³⁹. The first two individuals that fulfilled this role were Diego Daza (1576-1578) and his associate Martín de Olivares (1579-1603). As a matter of fact, only Olivares was formally acknowledged as Correo Mayor, and only several years after being authorized by the viceroy to distribute the *Audiencia* correspondence.

A notorious feature of mail concessions in New Spain is they that were conferred as “gifts”. Neither Olivares nor Daza paid to become those in charge of mail in New Spain. In May 1579, King Philip II ratified Martín de Olivares as the first Correo Mayor of New Spain⁴⁰. The confirmation decree that endorsed the establishment of the position arrived less than three years later. This ratification was used to better define the limits of such liability. For example, a fine of 20 pesos was established for king’s officers who did not use the services provided by the Correo Mayor.⁴¹ After 1604, the position began to be conferred by auction.

Indeed, this privilege implied two great advantages: (1) It gave first-hand access to information, and (2) The Correo Mayor would become a “*regidor*” in the city he was living in. Certainly it was an inexpensive way to become a justice and governmental authority in a city like Mexico. In 1604, the death of the first Correo Mayor was seen as the right time to auction the concession, instead of conferring it as a “gift”. Alonso Díez de la Barrera (1604-14) was the first purchaser of the position. Díez obtained the privilege after an auction procedure in which he offered 58,000 pesos for the concession. Although there were two other candidates, Díez was chosen by *oidores* of the *Audiencia* for presenting the best proposal. A couple of years later, this transaction was endorsed by the Council of the Indies in Spain.

As explained in the previous section, in Seville the *correo mayor* position had already been sold. However, the Mexican case is still exceptional for the magnitude of the privilege. The concession of a viceroyalty had never been auctioned and sold. This was influenced by two factors: 1) the possibility of obtaining financial resources for the Real Hacienda, and 2) the possibility of establishing a space in which any private agent (with enough money to win the auction) could be responsible for postal distribution. In general, the position tended to open up new opportunities for diverse private sectors to buy and serve in mail concessions⁴².

39 A summary of the evolution of this and other mail concessions in Mexico can be found in “Expedientes de la Administración de Correos de México”, 1620-1766, AGI, *Correo* 141C.

40 “Consulta del Consejo”, 1579, AGI, *Indiferente*, 739, n.º 179.

41 “Real Provisión”, 1582, AGI, *México*, 1091, leg. 10, ff. 60v.-62r.

42 See (González, “De la “confianza” a las sospechas de corrupción”)

In fact, over the years it was *criollos* born in America (and not Spaniards) who were able to afford the purchase of this privilege in New Spain. Such phenomena gradually attenuated the local and indigenous elites' fear that their precious autonomy over correspondence delivery would be lost.

Guatemala and the consolidation of a model

Simultaneously, the idea of establishing and auctioning a mail concession was being conceived in the *Audiencia* of Guatemala. This transformation definitively took place in 1620. The Guatemalan case has been understood by researchers as a replica of what happened in Mexico. Nevertheless, it must be said these processes were related but autonomous. Even though communication needs were similar, local elites presented their own petitions to request the establishment of an autonomous *correo mayor* concession appointed to New Spain. It was a particularly recurring phenomenon between 1580 and 1620 for *oidores* (who had to be of Castilian origin) to send an important set of letters to Spain, in which they asked for an improvement in the postal distribution scheme in the Kingdom of Guatemala⁴³. In the New Kingdom of Granada or even in Santo Domingo (not under the jurisdiction of the Correo Mayor del Perú either), there was no such level of commitment to the idea of establishing specific mail concessions⁴⁴.

Since the early years of the conquest, there were disagreements regarding the limited mechanisms that were available to Guatemalan authorities to send information at different levels⁴⁵. In fact, Castilian institutions expected Central American colonies to send their overseas mail via New Spain. Important cities such as San Miguel (El Salvador), Tegucigalpa (Honduras), Granada (Nicaragua), and Cartago (Costa Rica) did not have a direct connection route with Spain. This was the reason a significant part of mail from this region arrived in Europe from Mexico and another part through smuggling routes or through the Fleet of the Indies' circuit via Panama. Mail from South America circulated through the latter, among others⁴⁶.

43 See, for example, "Carta oidor", 1605, AGI, *Panamá*, 15, ramo 6, n.º 54.

44 So far, only one paper deals with this issue, but for the late Hapsburg era. See (González, "Allí Donde No Hubiere Correos Mayores").

45 "Cartas de oficiales reales de Honduras", 1537, AGI, *Guatemala*, 49, n.º 13.

46 It is important to point out Guatemala was under the jurisdiction of the Audiencia of Panama in certain moments of the sixteenth century. See "Real Cédula... avisando el traslado de la Audiencia de

As a working hypothesis, I propose to look at the case of the Correo Mayor de Guatemala as a defining moment for Spanish authorities to reaffirm their trust in mail concessions. In a parallel way, the establishment of the position in Guatemala ratified that the Correo Mayor de Indias (who resided in Lima) could only exercise jurisdiction in the Viceroyalty of Peru. Consequently, *correos mayores* in New Spain and Guatemala gained legal independence from *correos mayores* in Peru. The legal nature of these three positions was different, for the first two had been appointed by auction, while the latter had been conferred as a “gift” from the king.

The Correo Mayor de Guatemala position was purchased by Captain Pedro Crespo Suárez in 1620. The auction took place in Santiago de Guatemala, and three other people who held important government offices also participated as candidates. One of them, for example, was Baltasar Pinto, accountant of the *Audiencia*. The bidding started at 13 783 *tostones* (6 893 pesos) and reached 19 000 *tostones* (9 500 pesos). Preserving the principles applied in Castile and New Spain, *correos mayores* had the right to participate in *cabildos* in their capacity as *regidores*. The minutes from the Guatemala’s *cabildo* show that only four months after purchasing the position Crespo already participated and voted in the decision-making session of this city⁴⁷. This continued until his death in 1646. Table I shows a comparison of the long periods in which the *correos mayores* of Mexico and Guatemala carried out their functions. As can be seen in the table, the position was quite stable. For example, people like Francisco Díez and José de Estrada served as mail concession holders for over forty years. The position was lifelong instead of “perpetual”. In other words, the tenure would terminate upon its owner’s death; his descendants could not inherit it.

Guatemala a la ciudad de Panamá”, 1563, AGI, *Panamá*, 236, leg. 9, ff. 397r.-397v.

47 “Cabildo hecho”, 1621, AGCA, sig. A1.2.2, leg. 1773, exp. 11 767, ff. 172r.-v.

Table 1. Concessions sold in New Spain and Guatemala (1579-1768)

Correo Mayor of the Viceroyalty of New Spain			Correo Mayor of the Kingdom of Guatemala		
Correo Mayor's name	Term of the concession	Years of service	Correo Mayor's name	Term of the concession	Years of service
Diego Daza [Daça]	1576-1579	3 years	There were no correo mayor concessions		
Martín de Olivares	1579-1604	25 years			
Alonso Díez de la Barrera	1604-1614	10 years			
Pedro Díez de la Barrera	1614-1651	37 years	Pedro Crespo Suárez	1620-46	26 years
Francisco Alonso Díez de la Barrera y Bastida	1651-1693	42 years	Francisco De Lira y Cárcamo	1646-82	36 years
Miguel Díez de la Barrera	1693	1 year	José Agustín De Estrada, Azpetía y Sierra	1682-1730	48 years
Pedro Jiménez de los Cobos	1693-1720	27 years	Pedro Ortiz De Letona	1730-1768	38 years
Manuel Jiménez de los Cobos	1720-1745	25 years	Establishment of postal administrations (1768)		
Pedro Jiménez de los Cobos y Flores	1745-1752	12 years			
Pedro Jiménez de los Cobos, Peña y Flores	1752-1760	8 years			
Antonio Méndez Prieto y Fernández	1760-1766	6 years			
Establishment of postal administrations (1766)					

Source: 'Expedientes de la Administración de Correos de México', 1620-1766, AGI, *Correo* 141C y (Bosé, 'Los orígenes del correo terrestre en Guatemala.')

The cases of the *correos mayores* of Mexico and Guatemala are essential to prove that private agents were the basis of the postal structure within the Spanish Empire. In fact, mail concessions were deemed the best possible way to enhance communication in overseas possessions. This triggered the model's spread beyond Castile. Furthermore, the jurisdiction of Correos Mayores de Indias was enormous. This condition sparked unprecedented logistic challenges that many times were overcome. New Spain's *correo mayor* had a land jurisdiction over an area of approximately 8 000 000 km². In Guatemala, this estimation could amount to 1 000 000 km². In Castile, on the contrary, the court's *correo mayor* never had a jurisdiction over more than 500 000 km².

In New Spain, *tenientes de correo* served more sporadically. *Correos mayores* had some assistants for logistic tasks, but even though they carried out these activities on behalf of *correos mayores*, they cannot legally be seen as their *tenientes*. Over time, these assistants of *correos mayores* became more frequent in non-capital towns (such as Teocaltiche and New Galicia)⁴⁸. They usually helped with tasks such as coordinating food provisions for messengers, renting horses at a good price, or overseeing that mail chests were in good condition. Curiously enough, Teocaltiche was under the jurisdiction of the *Audiencia* of Guadalajara, one of the institutions that questioned the capabilities of mail in New Spain more vigorously.

Similarly, *tenientes de correo* had no restrictions against carrying mail from merchants, priests (without exemptions), or any other sector that required their services. Of course, their primary obligation as private agents was the distribution of official mail, but this did not disqualify them as a postal transport option like any other that existed in the Spanish empire. Essentially, *tenientes de correos* became part of the wide choice of mail transport. Therefore, *tenientes de correos* could negotiate the distribution of unofficial mail, as long as this did not interfere with the distribution of correspondence related to the government, the institution of justice, the Real Hacienda, and the religious sectors that had obtained privileges. In this sense, they were almost completely autonomous.

48 "Documento que contiene el requisitorio de la ciudad de Zacatecas para que el correo de Teocaltiche envíe los autos originales del concurso de acreedores", 1705, BPG, *Real Audiencia*, ramo: Civil.

Conclusion

The diverse experiences we have compared so far are crucial for understanding the communication dynamics that underpinned European expansion in the modern world. Certainly mail concessions during the sixteenth century became a strategy for exerting power from a distance and establishing permanent communication links between overseas vassals and Castilian authorities. Such concessions aimed at solving the supply of official correspondence of an overseas nature even in spite of the opposition of certain local elites. The Casa de la Contratación's case reveals that the *correo mayor* position was originally conceived as a solution to the problem of distributing official Indian correspondence in Europe. This experience was different from others in Castile, Portugal, England, and other places in the Holy Empire, both for its area of operation and its transcontinental ambitions. The case of New Spain and Guatemala assured that sale and auction processes were adopted in the Indian world to appoint concessions to private parties in the vast jurisdictional territories. Furthermore, the appointment of *tenencias de correos* to private individuals was useful for understanding the expansion of the *correo mayor* model at a local level, as well as the ways in which coverage was extended to cities (not necessarily capitals) with significant communication requirements.

Undoubtedly, the findings of this study support the idea that private sectors were relevant to the facilitation of communication in the early modern world, at the same time that they allow us to challenge the idea that the distribution of information has systematically been under the purview of modern states. At least in this one respect, current communication practices in Latin America share several features with those employed in the early modern world. Private agents have been and are a part of both the past and present distribution of correspondence in America.

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