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THE EMERGENCE OF *NAVÍOS DE AVISO* IN THE SPANISH EMPIRE AND THE EXCHANGE OF OVERSEAS CORRESPONDENCE (1492–1590)

## EL SURGIMIENTO DE LOS NAVÍOS DE AVISO EN EL IMPERIO ESPAÑOL Y EL INTERCAMBIO DE CORRESPONDENCIA CON ULTRAMAR (1492-1590)

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses the emergence of the *navíos de aviso*, or dispatch ships, within the Spanish Empire. These vessels carried hundreds of pieces of news and mail across the Atlantic Ocean. For three centuries, these *avisos* were essential to the circulation of overseas correspondence. Using unpublished sources from different American and European archives, I aim to show that the *navíos de aviso* represent an unprecedented attempt by the Spanish Crown to offer a transcontinental and overseas postal exchange service. The system was flexible, non-monopolistic, and designed to be used by official institutions or a wide variety of vassals. In fact, individuals of diverse ethnic origins were directly or indirectly involved with these ships specialized in mail transport. In order to show this, I examine the previous navigation experiences that supported the emergence of the system and the circumstances that made the service attractive to users. I also analyze the strategies used by the crown to regulate exchanges and the circumstances that allowed the *avisos* to gain independence from military-commercial convoys. The work covers a problem unexplored by historiography that is essential to understanding what made communication between Europe and America possible during early modernity.

**Keywords:** mail, postal, *navíos de aviso*, communication, maritime traffic, Atlantic world, sixteenth century.

## RESUMEN

El artículo analiza la emergencia de los *navíos de aviso* dentro del Atlántico “español”. Tales embarcaciones transportaron centenares de noticias y correos dentro del océano Atlántico. Durante tres siglos, los avisos fueron fundamentales para la circulación de correspondencia ultramarina. A partir de fuentes inéditas de diferentes archivos americanos y europeos, pretendo mostrar que los navíos de aviso representan un intento inédito de la Corona española por ofrecer un servicio de intercambio postal específicamente transcon-

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tinental y ultramarino. El sistema fue flexible, no monopolístico y concebido para que las instituciones oficiales o prácticamente cualquier vasallo pudiera utilizarlo. De hecho, directa o indirectamente individuos de proveniencias étnicas diversas tuvieron que ver con los barcos especializados en transportar correo. Para ello examino las experiencias previas de navegación que apoyaron el surgimiento del sistema y las circunstancias que hicieron atractivo el servicio para los usuarios. Asimismo, analizo las estrategias empleadas por la Corona para regular los intercambios y las circunstancias que permitieron a los avisos adquirir independencia de los convoyes militares-comerciales. El trabajo cubre un problema prácticamente inexplorado en la historiografía, pero esencial para entender por qué fue posible la comunicación entre Europa y América durante la primera modernidad.

**Palabras clave:** correo, postal, navíos de aviso, comunicación, circulación marítima, mundo atlántico, siglo XVI.

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During the modern era, the Spanish Atlantic was a highly dynamic communicative arena. In addition to the circulation of people and goods, this body of water allowed for a multidirectional exchange of information at different scales. All kinds of written and non-written content passed through it. Letters, maps, and printed matter circulated along with oral messages. Content of this nature was produced by Europeans and descendants of Europeans, but also by Native Americans, mestizos, or Afro-descendants.<sup>1</sup> The letters collected by Enrique Otte and Rocío Sánchez, as well as projects such as P.S. (Post Scriptum) have made it possible for us to study, to a certain extent, the scope of the communication networks that began to develop in the Atlantic world starting in the

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<sup>1</sup> Certain studies have presented valuable hypotheses regarding the communicative possibilities of non-European groups that travelled the Spanish Atlantic. Although this is still a developing field of interest, I particularly suggest reading: Caroline Dodds Pennock, "Aztecs Abroad? Uncovering the Early Indigenous Atlantic," in *American Historical Review*, 125, n.º 3, Bloomington, 2020, p. 801, available at <https://academic.oup.com/ahr/article/125/3/787/5864252> [accessed December 23, 2024]; Chloe L. Ireton, "Black Africans' Freedom Litigation Suits to Define Just War and Just Slavery in the Early Spanish Empire," in *Renaissance Quarterly*, 73, n.º 4, Chicago, 2020, p. 23, available at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/renaissance-quarterly/article/abs/black-africans-freedom-litigation-suits-to-define-just-war-and-just-slavery-in-the-early-spanish-empire/33FFB4838DC1B7636A68A1891617592D> [accessed December 23, 2024]; José Carlos de la Puente Luna, *Andean Cosmopolitans: Seeking Justice and Reward at the Spanish Royal Court*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2018, pp. 53–54; David Wheat, *Atlantic Africa and the Spanish Caribbean, 1570–1640*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2016, p. 228; Caroline Cunill, "Philip II and Indigenous Access to Royal Justice: Considering the Process of Decision-Making in the Spanish Empire," in *Colonial Latin American Review*, 24, London, 2015, pp. 505–524, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10609164.2016.1150035> [accessed December 23, 2024]; John F. Chuchiak IV, "Writing as Resistance: Maya Graphic Pluralism and Indigenous Elite Strategies for Survival in Colonial Yucatan, 1550–1750," in *Ethnohistory*, 57, n.º 1, Durham, 2010, pp. 87–116, available at <https://read.dukeupress.edu/ethnohistory/article-abstract/57/1/87/8894/Writing-as-Resistance-Maya-Graphic-Pluralism-and> [accessed December 23, 2024].

fifteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Depending on the needs, written messages could travel via official or private ships. Without a doubt, Christopher Columbus' arrival in the Caribbean opened the door to an exchange of transatlantic correspondence that was deeply linked to the advance of colonization. In 1496, the admiral was "congratulated" for taking advantage of ships to send written news of the progress of the expeditions to the Indies.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, historiography has highlighted the versatility of communicative exchanges in the Atlantic world. Works such as those by Geoffrey Parker, Renate Pieper, Arndt Brendecke, or Serge Gruzinski highlight the capacity of the Spanish empire to facilitate long-distance communication.<sup>4</sup> Something similar has been achieved by both "classical" and recent research focused on maritime correspondence, its production, and the agents in charge of its processing. In the 1920s, Cayetano Alcázar was the first to reflect on sixteenth-century mail as an autonomous research topic and using several unpublished sources.<sup>5</sup> In more recent times, Francisco Fernández's research stands out for addressing the structure that made possible the issuance and safekeeping of documents in institutions such as the Casa de la Contratación.<sup>6</sup> This type of reflection makes it possible to emphasize the fact that Castile and its possessions were able to send and receive information with relative fluidity. Despite certain material limitations, transcontinental communication allowed the coexistence of diverse practices of mobilization of correspondence, in which different logistics and actors converged to transport handwritten messages.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, conflict spaces participated actively in transatlantic communication. As analyzed by Hugo Contreras Cruces with regard to the Chilean case, the war between "mapuches," indigenous people of Chile, and Castilians in the early sixteenth century

<sup>2</sup> I suggest consulting: Enrique Otte, *Cartas privadas de emigrantes a Indias, 1540-1616*, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993; Rocío Sánchez Rubio and Isabel Testón Núñez, *El hilo que une: las relaciones epistolares en el Viejo y en el Nuevo Mundo, siglos XVI-XVIII*, Cáceres, Universidad de Extremadura, 1999. Likewise, transcriptions and analyses of a range of letters from the PS (Post Scriptum) project are available at <http://teitok.clul.ul.pt/postscriptum/es/index.php> [accessed December 20, 2023].

<sup>3</sup> Felicitación al almirante, Almazán, June 12, 1496, in Archivo General de Indias (hereinafter AGI), Patronato, 295, n.º 27.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998, pp. 103–145; Arndt Brendecke, *Imperio e información: funciones del saber en el dominio colonial español*, Madrid and Frankfurt am Main, Iberoamericana and Vervuert, 2012, pp. 43–102; Serge Gruzinski, *L'Aigle et le Dragon. Demesure européenne et mondialisation au XVIe siècle*, Paris, Fayard, 2015, pp. 48–59; Renate Pieper, *Die Vermittlung einer neuen Welt: Amerika im Nachrichtennetz des Habsburgischen Imperiums 1493–1598*, Mainz, Verlag P. von Zabern, 2000, pp. 55–67.

<sup>5</sup> Cayetano Alcázar Molina, *Historia del correo en América: (notas y documentos para su estudio)*, Madrid, Sucesores de Rivadeneyra (SA), 1920, p. 175.

<sup>6</sup> Francisco Fernández López, "Reserva y secreto en la correspondencia de la Casa de la Contratación de Indias," in *Revista de Humanidades*, 49, Sevilla, 2023, pp. 157–178, available at <https://revistas.uned.es/index.php/rdh/article/view/37899> [accessed December 23, 2024]; Francisco Fernández López, *La Casa de la Contratación: una oficina de expedición documental para el Gobierno de las Indias (1503-1717)*, Sevilla, Editorial Universidad de Sevilla, 2018, pp. 91–122.

<sup>7</sup> Nelson Fernando González Martínez, "Communicating an Empire and its Many Worlds: Spanish American Mail, Logistics, and Postal Agents, 1492–1620," in *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 101, n.º 4, Durham, 2021, pp. 567–596, available at <https://read.dukeupress.edu/hahr/article-abstract/101/4/567/213399/Communicating-an-Empire-and-Its-Many-Worlds?redirectedFrom=fulltext> [accessed December 22, 2024].

activated new communicative practices.<sup>8</sup> This relationship between war and information was replicated in the Gran Caribe at the end of the colonial period, where the clash between revolutionary forces and royalists led to an enormous flow of messages.<sup>9</sup> As argued by Cristina Soriano or Ernesto Bassi, circulation of printed texts and manuscripts was characteristic of the Atlantic revolutions in the Americas. And territories far from the metropolises (at war or pacified) were also able to integrate with the communicative circuits created through the contact between Spain and the Americas. As Sylvia Sellers-Garcia and Alejandra Dubcovsky have demonstrated, “peripheral” areas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were quite active in the production and reception of manuscripts.<sup>10</sup> In all cases, communication in war spaces, along borders, or in places where Spanish presence was limited took place in part thanks to local messengers and non-Hispanic correspondence carriers. In Spanish America, *chasquis* and other indigenous messengers were an essential part of this process, transporting correspondence in exchange for different types of remuneration.<sup>11</sup>

Other recent research has made efforts to analyze late-colonial projects for transforming the mail system, with special emphasis on the second decade of the eighteenth century. From a perspective with a primarily institutional focus, Rafael Cid-Rodríguez, Rocío Moreno-Cabanillas, and José Aranedá Riquelme have examined the impacts of the Bourbons’ communication policy in places such as Seville, Cartagena de Indias, and the Governate of Chile.<sup>12</sup> These authors show that, after 1720, the Spanish government carried out an imperial project to transform the mail into a service provided directly by

<sup>8</sup> Hugo Contreras Cruces, “*Mensajes desde tierra adentro. Treguas, parlamentos y el rol de cautivos y mensajeros en la frontera de Chile, principios del siglo XVII*”, in *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, 80, n.º 2, Seville, 2023, pp. 573–600, available at <https://estudiosamericanos.revistas.csic.es/index.php/estudiosamericanos/article/view/1045> [accessed February 3, 2025].

<sup>9</sup> Cristina Soriano, *Tides of Revolution: Information, Insurgencies, and the Crisis of Colonial Rule in Venezuela*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2018, pp. 149–182; Ernesto Bassi, *An Aqueous Territory: Sailor Geographies and New Granada’s Transimperial Greater Caribbean World*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016, pp. 12–23.

<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Sellers-García, *Distance and Documents at the Spanish Empire’s Periphery*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2013, pp. 79–140; Alejandra Dubcovsky, *Informed Power: Communication in the Early American South*, Cambridge and Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2016, pp. 42–67.

<sup>11</sup> Nelson Fernando González Martínez, “De los ‘chasquis’ de Nueva España: la participación de los indios en la movilización de correo y la reforma del aparato postal novohispano (1764-1780)”, in *Indiana*, 34, n.º 2, Berlin, 2018, pp. 85–109, available at <https://journals.iai.spk-berlin.de/index.php/indiana/article/view/2428/2016> [accessed December 23, 2024]; Katherine Bonil Gómez, “Free People of African Descent and Jurisdictional Politics in Eighteenth-Century New Granada: The Bogas of the Magdalena River,” in *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 24, n.º 2, London, 2018, p. 188, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10609164.2016.1150035> [accessed December 23, 2024].

<sup>12</sup> Rafael Cid-Rodríguez, *Los correos marítimos de indias en el siglo XVIII: expedición y circulación de la correspondencia*, Sevilla, UNED, 2022, pp. 21–104; Cid-Rodríguez, “La expedición de la correspondencia ultramarina y la salvaguarda de las comunicaciones postales con América durante los siglos XVI-XVIII,” in *Revista de Humanidades*, 49, Sevilla, 2022, pp. 269–281, available at <https://revistas.uned.es/index.php/rdh/article/view/38598/28532> [accessed December 23, 2024]; Rocío Moreno Cabanillas, *Comunicación e imperio: proyectos y reformas del correo en Cartagena de Indias (1707–1777)*, Madrid, Sílex, 2022, pp. 55–148; José Aranedá Riquelme, *Un gobierno de papel. El correo y sus rutas de comunicación en tiempos de la*

the State. The process involved the extinction of various postal concessions, known as the *Correo Mayor*, granted to individuals in Spain and America from the early fifteenth century. Their substitutes took the form of the *administraciones de correos* during the Bourbon government. Presiding over them were bureaucrats who answered principally to the king's secretary of state.

In general, historiography has reflected in a rather superficial way on maritime communicative logistics. However, in practice, the exchange of correspondence between Europe and America occurred mostly by sea. Despite this, the available literature has focused on analyzing communication in terrestrial contexts. Nearly 80 percent of the distance traveled by a message sent from Potosí to the Court of Castile—several months—took place in maritime environments. Likewise, the mail exchanged between Spain and the Philippines had to make two long sea journeys across the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. To tell the truth, we know very little about the strategies that enabled the movement of information between American, European, and Asian Atlantic ports, which has limited our understanding of the sea as a communicative scenario.

This article examines the emergence of the *navíos de aviso* within the context of the Spanish Atlantic. That is, the conditions under which such maritime channels of information exchange began to circulate. The *navíos de aviso* specialized in the transport of correspondence between Spain and America (and vice versa). The Spanish Crown used these *navíos de aviso* to create a system of regular postal exchange, even with the Philippine possessions (through New Spain). Although the priority was official correspondence, the service expanded its capabilities over time. Likewise, the existence of the *avisos* was not incompatible with other unofficial options for mobilizing different types of correspondence within the Atlantic.<sup>13</sup> Merchant ships and those transporting mercury and slaves also carried mail without it being considered illegal. Dispatch ships were considered a long-distance postal service that competed with other forms of non-government sponsored communication.

The first *navíos de aviso* set sail during the 1560s, departing from the ports of Andalusia and under the supervision of the Casa de la Contratación and the Consejo de Indias (Council of the Indies). However, in the preceding period, the Castilian Crown had already acquired valuable experience in circulating correspondence between Europe and America. Until the second half of the sixteenth century, there were no ships exclusively dedicated to transporting mail individually or via convoys. The idea, in the first six decades after Columbus' voyages, was to allow any private or official vessel to engage in maritime mail transport. Under this conception, it was not until the government of Philip II (1556–1598) that there was, strictly speaking, a specialized option for the transport

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*reforma imperial en Chile (1764-1796)*, Santiago, Biblioteca Nacional de Chile and Centro de Investigaciones Diego Barros Arana, 2020, pp. 76–158.

<sup>13</sup> Hereafter I will use the terms *navíos de avisos* and *avisos* indistinctly to refer to the information-transport system on which this study focuses. Sources at the time did likewise.

of transcontinental correspondence throughout the Atlantic world. Similarly, we should mention that over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Spanish acquired significant experience in transporting written news across the Mediterranean, with their possessions in Italy and along the coasts of the Canary and Azores Islands. This essay concentrates its analysis on the years prior to the navigation of the first *avisos*, in the interest of assessing where the idea of the *navío de aviso* came from and what exactly was transformed by these vessels. I will also analyze the historical moment in which the system was created, to examine the expectations under which the service was proposed. The scope of the text extends to 1590, when the *avisos*' system was already known and was an important alternative for the maritime transport of information. During this period, the crisis of the Castilian Armada and the issuance of new regulations governing the navigation of the Fleets of the Indies marked the beginning of a new phase in the development of the *avisos* during the seventeenth century.<sup>14</sup>

The studies of Pierre and Huguette Chaunu have provided important insights to the presence of the *navíos de aviso* in the Atlantic. Thanks to these contributions, mostly statistical in nature, we can confirm that such vessels circulated regularly from the second half of the sixteenth century. From the works mentioned above, we also know that *avisos* circulated once or twice a year, sometimes at the pace of the Indies Fleet and other times under independent licenses.<sup>15</sup> At the historiographical level, I understand and present the *emergence* of the *navíos de aviso* as a medium-term process to be examined in the context of the expectations, actors, practices, and regulatory framework to which it gave rise. Until now, historiography related to the topic has been mostly interested in drawing attention to the royal decrees and legal provisions that formalized the navigation of the *avisos*.<sup>16</sup>

My contribution seeks to demonstrate that, with the *navíos de aviso*, the Spanish government hoped to offer a service supported by its institutions, but it refused to manage it directly. And as on land, an agent was granted priority to mobilize the Crown's correspondence and that of its representatives by sea, but, in an emergency, any other viable option could be used to meet the communication need.<sup>17</sup> In any case, the system

<sup>14</sup> In fact, in 1591, new "ordinances" were issued for the circulation of the Indies Fleet. Regarding the successive changes in legislation governing the *avisos* beginning in the late sixteenth century, see: Joseph of Veitia Lineage, *Norte de la Contratación de las Indias Occidentales*, Sevilla, Francisco de Blas Impresor, 1672, lib. II, cap. XXI.

<sup>15</sup> See: Huguette Chaunu and Pierre Chaunu, *Séville et l'Atlantique (1504–1650). Première partie: partie statistique, Le mouvement des navires et des marchandises entre l'Espagne et l'Amérique de 1504 à 1650, tome V: Le trafic de 1621 à 1650*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1956, pp. 22–23, 32–33, 35, and 40–41.

<sup>16</sup> José María Vallejo García-Hevia, "Los navíos de aviso y los correos marítimos a Indias (1492-1898)," in *Ius Fugit: Revista Interdisciplinar de Estudios Histórico-Jurídicos*, 7, 1998, Zaragoza, pp. 197–268, available at <https://ifc.dpz.es/recursos/publicaciones/20/10/05garciahevia.pdf> [accessed: December 23, 2024]; Antonia Heredia Herrera, "Los 'avisos,' instrumentos de comunicación y transporte," in Junta de Andalucía, Ministerio de Cultura and CajaSur, *Obra Social y Cultural* (eds.), *Actas del II Congreso de Historia de Andalucía, Córdoba, 1991*, Córdoba, Consejería de Cultura, Junta de Andalucía, 1994, pp. 90–94.

<sup>17</sup> Regarding this pattern on land, see: Nelson Fernando González Martínez, "Mail Concessions for a Global Empire: Correos Mayores in the Spanish Empire in America (1514-1620)," in *Fronteras de la Historia*, 27, n.º

offered postal oversight and a formalization that did not exist until the mid-sixteenth century. With considerable flexibility, the *avisos* had the dual function of facilitating mobilization of both unofficial and official information. I will therefore show that the Crown created relatively few restrictions on the use of the service by groups and institutions of all kinds. Despite facing certain logistical problems, it was a more open and permissive postal system than previously thought.

#### AVISOS AND PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES

The concept of *aviso* had a broad and polysemic meaning<sup>18</sup> that included both exceptional information and ordinary news. For example, in 1503, the King of Castile received several urgent *avisos* regarding the defense of Granada.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, in 1496, the Castilian authorities received news of the capture of a group of thieves in a rural area of Zaragoza.<sup>20</sup> In the early sixteenth century, the term was widely used in legal, private, ecclesiastical, and literary documents. In the famous *Celestina* (ca. 1499), Fernando de Rojas conceived the word *aviso* as a synonym for news, warning, report, or update.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the work of Bartolomé de las Casas further corroborates the scope of the concept. In his text *Avisos y reglas para los confesores* (*Avisos and Rules for Confessors*) (1552), the Dominican friar used the concept in question to refer to the specific information that priests should have in order to carry out confessions in the Indian possessions.<sup>22</sup> In common parlance, giving (or receiving) *avisos* implied access to content of any kind.

Similarly, sending regular notifications was perceived as an act of mutual recognition, fidelity, and rapprochement between the king and his vassals. In principle, a “just” king had to be able to communicate with his subjects and respond to their most relevant petitions.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, should a vassal fail to provide notification and information, this

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2, Bogotá, 2022, pp. 283–304, available at <https://revistas.icanh.gov.co/index.php/fh/article/view/2328/1899> [accessed December 23, 2024].

<sup>18</sup> In Italy, the concept was also used extensively. For example, in Venice, handwritten and printed texts that communicated news were called *avvisi*. See: Philip of Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 183–187; Filippo de Vivo, “Microhistories of Long-Distance Information: Space, Movement and Agency in the Early Modern News,” in *Past & Present*, 242, Supplement 14, Oxford, 2019, p. 196, available at [https://academic.oup.com/past/article/242/Supplement\\_14/179/5637705](https://academic.oup.com/past/article/242/Supplement_14/179/5637705) [accessed December 23, 2024].

<sup>19</sup> Defensa de la costa, Alcalá de Henares, February 8, 1503, in Archivo General de Simancas (hereinafter AGS), CCA, CED, 6, 45, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Entrega de delincuentes, Almazán, December 4, 1496, in AGS, CCA, CED, 3-1, 62.5.

<sup>21</sup> Fernando de Rojas, *La Celestina*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1976, pp. 45, 77, 214.

<sup>22</sup> Bartolomé de las Casas, *Aquí se co[n]tiene[n] vnos auisos y reglas para los confesores*, Sevilla, Sebastián Trujillo Impresor, 1552.

<sup>23</sup> On the subject of remote governance I suggest: David T. Garrett, “‘In the remotest part of these realms’: Distance, Jurisdiction, and Royal Government in late Habsburg Cusco,” in *Colonial Latin American Review*, 21, n.º 1, London, 2012, pp. 17–43, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10609164.2>

could be seen as an act of disloyalty. This was the view of the Council of Castile, which proposed sanctioning people and corporations that “no dieran aviso” (“did not give notice”) of relevant facts.<sup>24</sup> The king and his institutions appreciated receiving all kinds of news, especially concerning distant or disputed territories.

The Spanish authorities were willing to invest in the flow of *avisos*. The early sixteenth century saw an increase in documentary records of payments to messengers who carried “avisos útiles” (“useful dispatches”).<sup>25</sup> The Castilian kings themselves insisted that trustworthy messengers be paid quickly, in cash, and using public funds.<sup>26</sup> On several occasions, King Charles V ordered immediate payment to messengers who carried news considered valuable to the government.<sup>27</sup> In urgent cases, mail was sent by special messengers or through an ambassador.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, the principal Castilian authorities allowed their officials located in Seville to “purchase” oral or written news.<sup>29</sup>

The flow of information was possible in possessions that were not under the rule of the King of Castile. Before contact with America, producers of official and private information used various strategies to circulate mail through territories controlled by Portuguese, French, Germans, or Muslims.<sup>30</sup> In the 1490s, the Crown intended to create a permanent fleet within the Mediterranean Sea that could transport mail to Italy despite not controlling much of the sea route.<sup>31</sup> Nor can it be ignored that much of the news about the conquest of America reached the Court of Castile through Portuguese ports such as Lisbon or even Bordeaux.<sup>32</sup> Charles V used his ambassadors to prevent, through diplomatic means, the Portuguese authorities from confiscating merchandise and information.<sup>33</sup>

It is of course difficult to ignore the role of Andalusia. In the late fifteenth century, in the interest of security, the Crown ordered that overseas vessels should preferably be dispatched and received in ports such as Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Rota, or Bonanza,<sup>34</sup> where it was possible to produce, receive, store, and retransmit information at different scales.<sup>35</sup> Relatively quickly, during the years of Castile’s “Atlantic expansion,” a global

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012.661973 [accessed December 23, 2024]; Adrian Masters, “A Thousand Invisible Architects: Vassals, the Petition and Response System, and the Creation of Spanish Imperial Caste Legislation,” in *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 98, n.º 3, Durham, 2018, pp. 377–406, available at <https://read.dukeupress.edu/hahr/article-abstract/98/3/377/135091/A-Thousand-Invisible-Architects-Vassals-the> [accessed December 23, 2024].

<sup>24</sup> Pesquisa de los alcaldes, Vitoria, October 8, 1483, in AGS, RGS, L. 148310, 244.

<sup>25</sup> Ayuda de costa, Granada, October 15, 1501, in AGS, CCA, CED, 321, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Pago de 6,000 maravedíes, Granada, October 30, 1500, in AGS, CCA, CED, 4, 208, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Cédula del Emperador Carlos V, Vitoria, September 30, 1542, in AGS, CCA, DIV, 41, 59, f. 284r.

<sup>28</sup> Pago a Albanés, Granada, September 15, 1500, in AGS, CCA, CED, 4, 168, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Orden a los oficiales, Seville, June 21, 1511, in AGI, Indiferente, 418, L.3, F.100r (1).

<sup>30</sup> Carta Gómez Suarez, Genoa, September 28, 1534, in AGS, EST, L.1367, 128.

<sup>31</sup> Localización de carracas, Tarazona, October 19, 1495, in AGS, CCA, CED, 2, 2–1, 146, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Carta de Cristóbal Colón, Lisbon, February 15, 1493 and March 14, 1493, in AGS, EST, L.1, 2, 1, 164.

<sup>33</sup> Instrucciones a Cristóbal Barroso, Palencia, May 23, 1522, in AGI, Indiferente, 420, L.9, fs. 24v–26v.

<sup>34</sup> Shipwrecks, breakdowns, attacks, or “lost” (off-course) ships also activated circuits from non-Spanish ports. See: Despacho de cartas, Toledo, March 7, 1539, in AGI, Indiferente, 1962, L.6, fs. 175v–176r.

<sup>35</sup> Brendecke, *Imperio e información...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 413–456; Ernesto Schaffer, *El Consejo Real y Supremo de las Indias*, vol. I, Seville, University of Seville, 1935, p. 49.

nucleus for the circulation of news about Europe, America, Africa, and Asia was activated in the Andalusian territories. Also essential were the founding, in Seville, of the Casa de la Contratación, in 1503, and the Consulado de Cargadores a Indias, in 1543.<sup>36</sup> These institutions managed various aspects related to trade and navigation to the Indies.

In addition to cities such as Seville and its adjacent ports, other locations were part of the Atlantic communication logic, as places for transit, water loading, and repairs. The Azores, Canary, Madeira Islands and Portimão served as ports of call for ships transporting information. Ships often had to stop at overseas islands such as these when they were damaged, short of provisions, or it was simply not safe to reach the mainland. Advantage was taken of these layovers to produce dozens of *avisos* that warned of eventualities on the outbound voyage, or notifying of the imminent arrival of the ships at planned ports of disembarkation.

For example, in 1538, the King authorized the Casa de la Contratación to dispatch a schooner to transport news to the Azores Islands. In this case, the objective was to warn a fleet of ships coming from America about the presence of pirates near Andalusia.<sup>37</sup> It was common during this period to use these mechanisms to report on the military situation in the most used ports before ships landed.<sup>38</sup> Such mobilizations of “news” vessels were essential to inform ship captains whether it was safe to approach land. These types of authorizations from the king became more frequent during the early sixteenth century, creating a need for ships dedicated to the timely transmission of news. In terms of time, we know that, by 1523, a message could travel between the Azores and the Court in Valladolid (passing through Seville) in about three weeks.<sup>39</sup>

Island centers for the production, reception, and circulation of written information were also established on the American side of the Atlantic. Europeans and non-Europeans participated in an active communication network between Santo Domingo, Cubagua, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, and Cuba.<sup>40</sup> Written content on topics such as relations with native populations, evangelization, and tax payments were exchanged from the early sixteenth century onward. In 1532, treasurer Francisco de Castellano reported receiving news, via different letters produced in the Caribbean, of the sale of 9,333 pesos of clothing.<sup>41</sup> The clothing had been sold in the areas surrounding the island of Cubagua (now Venezuela). These dynamics encouraged the circulation of written and oral information in spaces surrounding continental port centers.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>36</sup> González Martínez, “Mail Concessions for...,” *op. cit.*, pp. 290–293.

<sup>37</sup> Despacho de carabela, Valladolid, February 23, 1538, in AGI, Indiferente, 1962, L.6, fs. 3r–3v.

<sup>38</sup> Luis Sarmiento de Mendoza, Valladolid, January 19, 1537, in AGI, Indiferente, 422, L.17, fs. 89r–90r.

<sup>39</sup> I suggest a review of: Real Cédula, Valladolid, July 31, 1523, in AGI, Indiferente, 420, L.9, fs. 171v–172r.

<sup>40</sup> The governor of Cubagua, for example, in 1533, declared having sent numerous manuscripts to Santo Domingo. See: Carta del licenciado, Cubagua, March 5, 1533, at AGI, Santo Domingo, 180, ramo 13, n.º 83.

<sup>41</sup> Francisco de Castellano, Cubagua, October 29, 1532, in AGI, Contaduría, 1562.

<sup>42</sup> Real Cédula al licenciado Vadillo, Toledo, November 6, 1528, in AGI, Indiferente, 421, L.13, fs. 418v–421v.

Of course, the aforementioned communication framework was stimulated by the founding of cities such as Mexico, Santiago de Guatemala, Bogotá, and Lima between 1520 and 1550, as well as the discovery of important centers for the production of pearls, gold, silver, and emeralds.<sup>43</sup> These centers were into the communication networks with each other and with the Atlantic correspondence circulation routes. As the Castilians began occupying new territories, authorities were anxious to obtain “full information” regarding the Indian territories. As a result of the new panorama, in the *hinterland* surrounding the main Andalusian and American ports it became more common for small ships to carry messages or notify the authorities of possible developments. These ships did not undertake transatlantic voyages, but nevertheless created habits and a body of practical experience for mobilization that proved essential to the operation of *navíos de aviso*.

#### MULTIPLE SHIPS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Much of the Atlantic correspondence during the first part of the sixteenth century circulated via merchant vessels. These ships often carried letters of various kinds. For example, lawyer Cristóbal de Benavente affirmed that he sent several letters “regarding temporal and spiritual matters” from Tenochtitlan (Mexico) to Seville. Having received no reply, Benavente speculated that the Atlantic couriers may have “stopped dispatching them.”<sup>44</sup> Correspondence like this was transported on *navíos de registro* (registry ships) whose primary purpose was trade. In the opposite direction, in 1557, authorities in Nombre de Dios (now Panama) confirmed the receipt of numerous official letters from ships dedicated to, among other things, the mobilization of enslaved people.<sup>45</sup> The disadvantages of the practice described above included the lack of a regular and standardized postal service, a dependence on the vagaries of trade and its speculations, and no explicit official support to protect the producers of correspondence.

In addition, military vessels also transported mail and represented another alternative for users. These ships guaranteed an seemingly higher level of security for correspondence. However, there were also risks. Mail transported by the king’s navy ships often landed far from its final destination or was thrown overboard or surrendered to pirates.<sup>46</sup> Situations like these were commonplace during the war between Spain and France for control of certain Italian regions in the mid-sixteenth century. During those years, authorities in several American ports received orders not to allow ships to dock or depart

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<sup>43</sup> For example, the issue of border delimitation and taxation in Buenos Aires encouraged the production of information. With regard to the above, please see: Manda que informe, Valladolid, April 21, 1554, in AGI, Buenos Aires, 1, L.2, f. 9v; Quinto sobre oro, plata y perlas, Guadalajara, September 10, 1546, in AGI, Buenos Aires, 1, L.1, fs. 171r–171v.

<sup>44</sup> Por otras cartas, Tenochtitlan, June 3, 1544, in AGI, Mexico, 68, ramo 11, n.º 26.

<sup>45</sup> De lo que tenemos, Nombre de Dios, March 21, 1557, in AGI, Panama, 32, n.º 10.

<sup>46</sup> En la Flota pasada, Panama, May 26, 1571, in AGI, Panama 13, ramo 11, n.º 44.

until the French pirates had been driven away.<sup>47</sup> Military ships also tended to prioritize communication with places at the epicenter of a conflict. As a result, Royal Navy ships were unable to offer wide coverage or a constant frequency.

Mail producers were free to offer a payment to ship owners or to arrange for postal services as a favor. For ship captains, transporting letters from the king's officers or merchants without pay could later translate into remuneration. When the service was paid, the amounts varied according to the urgency, safety conditions, and distance. From references made years later, we know that, from the sixteenth century forward, the transport of a simple letter between Cadiz and ports such as Veracruz and Portobelo could cost four *reales de vellón*.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, payment for service at the end of a journey could act as an incentive for messenger-sailors to deliver correspondence to overseas ports. Friars, bureaucrats, and passengers also acted as unpaid couriers for the transport of written messages.<sup>49</sup>

To keep a record of shipments, overseas letters included references to ships, messengers, and dates on which messages were sent. The ship or fleet that had allowed for carriage of one or more letters might be mentioned at the beginning of the texts. It was not unusual for certain mail users to refer to the ship's captain or another person from whom they had received mail. On December 8, 1557, the Viceroy of Peru reported having sent eleven letters to Spain from Cartagena, Nombre de Dios, Panama, Paíta, Trujillo, and Lima, providing important clues as to the timing of the shipment. All of these letters reached Spain via the service provided by navy and private vessels.<sup>50</sup> Several replies also reached Peru thanks to the same mechanisms.

In other words, during the first part of the sixteenth century, the Hispanic-American communications apparatus depended fundamentally on agents not specialized in postal activities. As has been suggested, no individuals either on land or at sea had been delegated to oversee the specific processes of distributing overseas correspondence or monitoring messengers. The success of a postal shipment depended on a set of human/material variables subject to contingencies. Nor was there, in the early years of colonization, a general legal framework defining how correspondence should be transported on ships or the procedures for transfer at ports. On the contrary, "postal" regulations focused on very specific aspects and referred to major communication hubs.

However, little by little certain postal regulations and control strategies were created. Around 1514, the Casa de la Contratación in Seville was designated a Correo Mayor to guarantee the flow of mail to and from the Indies. These *correos mayores* and their lieutenants became an official channel for supervising the distribution of overseas mail.

<sup>47</sup> Que la hacienda de S.M, Madrid, May 18, 1553, in AGI, Panama, 236, L.9, fs. 113r–113v.

<sup>48</sup> This data was referred to in the process of extinction of the Correo Mayor concessions, which occurred in the eighteenth century. See: Reglamento Provisional, Madrid, August 20, 1765, in AGI, Correos 141 C.

<sup>49</sup> For example, in 1538, the King ordered his governors to facilitate circulation to Peru of Francisco Maldonado, who was carrying official correspondence. See: Cedula Real de D<sup>a</sup> Isabel, Valladolid, June 8, 1538, in AGI, Lima, 565, L.3, f. 9r.

<sup>50</sup> He escrito a Vuestra Majestad, Lima, December 8, 1557, in AGI, Lima, 28 A.

However, its jurisdiction applied only within the Iberian Peninsula. The people appointed to this position were responsible for selecting and supervising overland messengers.<sup>51</sup> Although the *correos mayores* of the Casa de la Contratación had no direct influence on the ships that transported the mail, they did have jurisdiction on the territory between ports and final destinations in Castile. Their main responsibility was to ensure that mail was carried (to and from) the ports and other inland locations, and that the Consejo de Indias was supplied with correspondence about the Indies. A significant amount of official and ecclesiastical correspondence was sent and received through this channel and numerous pieces of mail produced in Lima, Mexico, Santo Domingo, Santafé de Bogotá, and other continental American territories arrived in Spain.

On the American continent, however, there was no Correo Mayor prior to 1560.<sup>52</sup> Instead, the principal port authorities during this period acted as postal agents. Certain justice, government, or royal treasury officials were in charge of the overseas mail. This meant that in port cities such as Nombre de Dios, Veracruz, Cartagena de Indias, or Havana mail was distributed by justice officials and government officials such as governors. Domestically, in America, mail was also redistributed by people such as court judges, *corregidores*, *alcaldes*, and merchants. This model, however, sparked strong criticism. During the government of Charles V, several governors acting as postal agents were accused of delaying the delivery of mail from ports and unjustifiably “detaining” ships carrying letters.<sup>53</sup>

In this context, the Castilian king was willing to delegate certain people to ensure the flow of mail. A similar trend existed in other European kingdoms. Within the Holy Roman Empire, Portugal, and several Italian territories, monarchs assigned postal concessions that empowered an individual or family to take charge of distributing correspondence.<sup>54</sup> In Europe and Castile, overland mail concessions were not intended to monopolize postal exchanges. On the contrary, various mail transport options coexisted legally. The Taxis family, of Germanic and Lombard origin, were notable beneficiaries of postal concessions. Due to their expertise in moving packages, the Taxis were authorized in several places in Europe (including Castile) to handle the distribution of official mail.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> González Martínez, “Communicating an Empire...,” *op. cit.*, pp. 576–580; González Martínez, “Mail Concessions for...,” *op. cit.*, p. 290; Nelson Fernando González Martínez, “Comunicarse a pesar de la distancia: la instalación de los Correos Mayores y los flujos de correspondencia en el mundo hispanoamericano (1501-1640)”, en *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos. Nouveau Monde Nouveaux Mondes - Novo Mundo Mundos Novos - New World New Worlds*, Paris, 2017, available at <https://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/71533?lang=es> [accessed August 20, 2024].

<sup>52</sup> González Martínez, “Mail Concessions for...,” *op. cit.*, p. 290.

<sup>53</sup> Real provisión a los presidentes [...] para que no se detengan los navíos, Madrid, August 10, 1530, in AGI, Indiferente, 422, L.14, f. 115v.

<sup>54</sup> Jay Caplan, *Postcard Culture in Europe, 1500–1800*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2016, pp. 38–67.

<sup>55</sup> Rachel Midura, “‘They Hide from Me, Like the Devil from the Cross’: Transalpine Postal Routes as Intelligence Work, 1555–1645,” in *History*, 108, n.º 381, London, 2023, 303–307, available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1468-229X.13362> [accessed August 20, 2024]; Wolfgang Behringer, *Thurn und*

Evidence seems to indicate that in the 1550s several caravel ships made long-distance trips with correspondence. The experiences gained on these voyages undoubtedly contributed to strengthening the justifications that ultimately led to the *navíos de aviso*. In fact, a royal decree from 1556 tells us that the King ordered that the Casa de la Contratación prepare “two *carabelas de aviso* to sail to the Indies.”<sup>56</sup> Two years earlier, merchants in Seville had requested the King send a *carabela de aviso* to New Spain with news of the war with France. The King, however, denied the request. In his opinion, “there was no need” because in the Indies they were “well warned by many letters” of the development of the conflict.<sup>57</sup> Of course, preparing the vessels would also have required extraordinary financial resources that could hardly be authorized. Around the same time, the president of the Casa de la Contratación suggested sending *carabelas de aviso* from Spain to collect information on Veracruz, Florida, and Guatemala.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the limitations inherent in war or long-distance navigation, traffic across the Atlantic was not always slow and disorganized. On the contrary, the postal system on many occasions satisfied users’ expectations. Places like Santo Domingo, Cuba, and Mexico had the capacity to efficiently exchange information to and from Europe. On July 1, 1556, several boxes of letters left Mexico City without any major incidents. The maritime journey took less than 67 days: San Juan de Ulúa (July 8, 1556); Havana (July 15, 1556), and Sanlúcar de Barrameda (September 13, 1556).<sup>59</sup> With proper synchronization, in less than six months a piece of mail could circulate between the Castilian territories and Peru (or vice versa).<sup>60</sup> For example, a letter that had been sent from Lima on October 25, 1554 was replied to in Valladolid on March 16, 1555 (139 days later). In fact, it was reasonable to expect that correspondence could travel back and forth between cities separated by nearly 10,000 non-linear kilometers in close to three months.

In short, the overseas communication apparatus created a number of ways in which to respond to the early sixteenth-century postal needs. Military and commercial vessels, as well as the *carabelas de aviso* that gravitated to ports, played an essential and complementary role in facilitating the exchange of information. Although these logistics had enabled communication during the period following Columbus’ voyages, little by little, there was a growing opinion that the system could be improved. The main political agents repeatedly complained about the system’s vulnerability. Uncertainty was

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*Taxis: Die Geschichte ihrer Post und ihrer Unternehmen*, Munich, Piper, 1990, pp. 8–23; Fritz Ohmann, *Die Anfänge des Postwesens und die Taxis*, Leipzig, Duncker und Humblot, 1909, pp. 84–171.

<sup>56</sup> Real Cedula [...] sobre dos carabelas de Aviso, Valladolid, March 5, 1556, in AGI, Indiferente, 1965, L.13 fs. 87v–89r.

<sup>57</sup> Nuestros oficiales que residís, Seville, July 21, 1554, in AGI, Indiferente, 1965, L.12, f. 176r.

<sup>58</sup> En una carabela de aviso que despaché, Seville, November 13, 1554, in AGI, Contratación, 5103.

<sup>59</sup> Este correo despachamos, Seville, July 1, 1556, in AGI, Indiferente, 2001.

<sup>60</sup> Remite a su majestad cartas venidas en esta flota con noticias del Perú, Valladolid, April 1, 1554, in AGI, Indiferente, 737, n.º 121, fs. 1r–4v.

the most common obstacle.<sup>61</sup> The system was poorly regulated and it was thought that modifications were needed.

#### OFFICIAL SUPPORT AND FLEXIBILITY

Strictly speaking, the *navíos de aviso* began to circulate within the Atlantic in the 1560s.<sup>62</sup> By 1562, records existed of the voyage and return voyage of several *avisos*. That year, Francisco de Fonseca died on a mail boat returning from America, without having made a will.<sup>63</sup> The vessel traveled the route between Tierra Firme and Sanlúcar de Barrameda, from where it had departed nearly eight months earlier. And documents have been found of legal disputes filed soon afterwards related to smuggling, shipwrecks, or the financing of *navíos de aviso*. In 1564, Alonso Carrillo, captain and owner of the Veracruz, claimed 500 ducats in salary from the Spanish authorities for having sailed from the island of Havana with letters. His request petitioned for compensation for the transport of “books and writings [letters],” as well as a group of French hostages. In this case, the Council of the Indies accepted the plaintiff’s claim and ordered the Casa de la Contratación to pay him.<sup>64</sup> Unlike other ships that made round trips as *navíos de aviso*, the evidence seems to indicate that the Veracruz fulfilled this function on its return voyage only. The above shows the flexibility of the system from the time it began operating. The term “navío de aviso” points to the fact that these vessels were primarily used to transport information, news, and messages. Some users, however, in the first years of the system’s existence, also employed the terms *nao de aviso* or *carabela de aviso*.<sup>65</sup>

Traditionally, historiography has taken the year 1561 as the starting date of the *navíos de aviso* system. The process coincided with the policies proposed by the government of Philip II to promote “navegación en conserva”, or in convoys (fleets).<sup>66</sup> At the time, a famous royal proviso was issued that attempted to redefine several aspects related to the Indies Fleet. The proviso was drafted based on numerous previous documents criticizing solo or independent navigation, or navigation in *navíos de registro*

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<sup>61</sup> For example, see: En esta última Flota, Nombre de Dios, July 15, 1554, in AGI, Panama, 33, n.º 36.

<sup>62</sup> Documentation includes references such as: “Nabio de abiso”, “nabio de aviso”, and “navio de auisso”, among other calligraphic variations.

<sup>63</sup> Diligencias sobre cobro de bienes de difuntos, Seville, October 16, 1562, in AGI, Contratación, 200, n.º 2, ramo 13.

<sup>64</sup> Alonso Carrillo dueño y maestre, Seville, July 24, 1565, in AGI, Justicia, 998, n.º 2.

<sup>65</sup> Carabela de Aviso de Nueva España, Madrid, May 21, 1574, in AGI, Indiferente, 1956, L.1. fs. 202v–203r.

<sup>66</sup> Antonio García-Baquero González, *La carrera de Indias: suma de la contratación y océano de negocios*, Sevilla, Algaida, 1992, pp. 90–94; Clarence Henry Haring *Comercio y navegación entre España y las Indias en la época de los Habsburgos*, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1979, pp. 234–259.

(ships outside the Spanish Fleet).<sup>67</sup> Essentially, the new policy sought to restrict travel in Atlantic convoys to twice a year (January and August). The new provisions also sought to circumscribe maritime routes, protect sailors from abuse, determine sanctions for smugglers, and seek strategies to reduce the exposure of Spanish ships in the Atlantic.<sup>68</sup> Due to war and other logistical circumstances, convoy navigation had fallen into disuse by the mid-sixteenth century.<sup>69</sup>

The greatest innovation offered by the *avisos* was a means of long-distance mail transport protected by the Crown. Specifically, the service was intended to increase and regularize the flow of correspondence between European and American ports. Although historiography has tended to reiterate that this service benefited mainly the ports of Nombre de Dios and Veracruz, the system was much more versatile.<sup>70</sup> Over the course of two centuries, ports such as Havana, Buenos Aires, and Santa Marta also welcomed *navíos de aviso*.<sup>71</sup> The *avisos* project meant that the Crown managed and monitored a certain type of vessels specialized in the transport of mail.

Unlike other maritime-related issues modified in the mid-sixteenth century, there is no evidence to suggest that the creation of the *avisos* system generated any major controversy or political disruption. Around 1560, as on earlier occasions, several information producers complained about the lack of regular, protected means of transport for overseas mail. In places like Panama, the King's officers reiterated their complaints and claims regarding the problems arising from not having at least one postal option supported by the Crown.<sup>72</sup> Certain producers of correspondence undoubtedly considered the dependence on military and commercial ships a risk to the distribution of information and confidentiality.

Neither did the *correos mayores* express any opposition to the emergence of the *navíos de aviso*. As mentioned previously, said agents were responsible for the overland distribution of correspondence. An increase in the flow of overseas correspondence could be seen as an economic advantage for the *correos mayores*. Indeed, an increase in circulation of maritime mail in the Atlantic could increase the *correo's* profits by having more mail moving from ports to inland cities. This is due to the fact that

<sup>67</sup> Real Provisión de D. Felipe conteniendo las ordenanzas que han de cumplir, Madrid, July 16, 1561, in AGI, Indiferente, 1966, L.14, fs. 35v–37v.

<sup>68</sup> This issue generated various controversies beginning in 1520. See: Esteban Mira Caballos, “Pedro Menéndez de Avilés diseñó el modelo de flota de Carrera de Indias,” in *Revista de Historia Naval*, 24, n.º 94, Madrid, 2006, pp. 7–24, available at [https://bibliotecavirtual.defensa.gob.es/BVMDefensa/es/catalogo\\_imagenes/grupo.do?path=329063](https://bibliotecavirtual.defensa.gob.es/BVMDefensa/es/catalogo_imagenes/grupo.do?path=329063) [accessed August 20, 2024]; José Manuel Díaz Blanco, “Una armada de galeras para la Carrera de Indias: el Mediterráneo y el comercio colonial en tiempos de Felipe II,” in *Revista de Indias*, 74, n.º 262, Madrid, 2014, pp. 661–692, available at <https://revistadeindias.revistas.csic.es/index.php/revistadeindias/article/view/970/1044> [accessed August 20, 2024].

<sup>69</sup> García-Baquero González, *La carrera de Indias...*, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>70</sup> Vallejo García-Hevia, “Los navíos de...,” *op. cit.*, p. 199.

<sup>71</sup> Regarding the dynamics of sending *navíos de aviso* to the Caribbean and Buenos Aires, see: *Envien una carabela*, Madrid, June 3, 1565, in AGI, Indiferente, 1966, L.15, fs. 298v–299r; *Carta de Gabriel de Ocaña*, Madrid, November 12, 1643, in AGI, Indiferente, 436, L.12, fs. 95v.

<sup>72</sup> *Carta de los oficiales*, Nombre de Dios, July 29, 1561, in AGI, Panama, 33, n.º 55.

the annual payment of *correo mayor* agents fluctuated, depending on the volume of correspondence they transported. Curiously, *correo mayor* posts seemed to increase in value after 1560. At the time, there was a strong dispute in the Court over the jurisdiction of the post of Correo Mayor of Lima, which theoretically controlled the distribution of overseas mail between Panama and the southern part of the continent.<sup>73</sup> A few years later, the post of Correo Mayor of Mexico was sold at auction for the first time for the astronomical sum of 58,000 *pesos de a ocho* (pieces of eight).<sup>74</sup>

In practice, the *avisos* system was not intended as a postal monopoly. For this reason, after 1560, part of the Indies mail continued to circulate via unofficial ships. There was no incompatibility between the different unofficial options for transporting correspondence. This flexibility served to expand coverage and to mobilize duplicate or triplicate copies of letters. “Loose” ships, known as *navíos de azogue*, or ships sailing outside of a convoy, did not have any restrictions on transiting with correspondence.<sup>75</sup> At the time, these vessels also helped transport the paper, ink, and thread essential for the production of correspondence. The inventory of the ship *Los Reyes Magos* shows that the vessel transported several pounds of “letter thread” and several “large reams of white paper”<sup>76</sup> from Seville to Honduras.

The *navíos de aviso* were conceived as a new alternative to strengthen overseas communication between vassals of different social and ethnic origins. Users, depending on their means, could choose the *avisos* if they found it to be the most convenient postal option. Faced with the growing demand for mail, the Crown’s strategy was not to limit the means of exchanging written information, but to expand them. Certain officers were even praised for taking advantage of the opportunity to send information and news on unofficial ships.<sup>77</sup> At the time when the *navíos de aviso* began to circulate, governors in Tierra Firme and Honduras received the King’s thanks for the diligence with which they had sent several letters via commercial vessels. At certain times, even though they were given priority, an *aviso* might not be the most practical postal alternative for official authorities.

<sup>73</sup> Pleito fiscal: Diego de Carvajal y Marcos Correoso, Lima, February 25, 1562, in AGI, Justicia, 434, n.º 2, ramo 4.

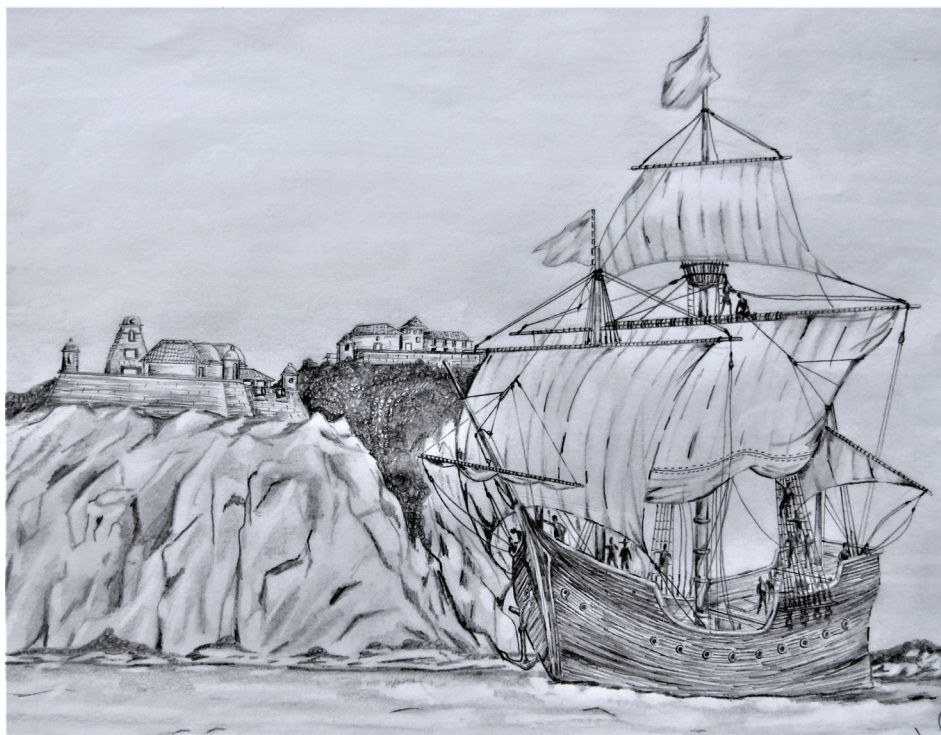
<sup>74</sup> Nelson Fernando González Martínez, “Corrupciones no probadas: el ‘fraude’ del correo mayor en Nueva España (1693-1701),” in *Historia y Memoria*, 19, Tunja, 2019, p. 204, available at [https://revistas.uptc.edu.co/index.php/historia\\_memoria/article/view/8784/9321](https://revistas.uptc.edu.co/index.php/historia_memoria/article/view/8784/9321) [consulted August 20, 2024].

<sup>75</sup> We must not forget that mail to and from the Philippines was transported primarily on commercial vessels. See: Carta de oficiales, Cebu, May 28, 1565, in AGI, Patronato, 23, ramo 24.

<sup>76</sup> Registra don Cristobal Olmedo, Seville, April 9, 1557, in AGI, Contratación, 1079, n.º 8.

<sup>77</sup> Real Cédula a los oficiales de la Casa de la Contratación, Madrid, November 23, 1561, in AGI, Indiferente, 1966, L.14, fs. 109v–110r.

Source: Elaboration by the author and Mauricio Puentes Cala.



**FIGURE 1:** POSSIBLE APPEARANCE OF A DISPATCH SHIP ARRIVING AT A CARIBBEAN PORT (CA. 1570).

Figure 1 recreates what a *navío de aviso* may have hypothetically appeared during the second half of the sixteenth century. The idea was to portray a ship in motion, ready to “drop anchor” in one of the Caribbean ports. The illustration also shows deck hands and sailors performing maneuvers with the sails to bring the ship to a stop several hundred meters from the landing site. Figure 1 is also useful in showing that, while ships of greater capacity and more complex engineering began to be used for trade at this time, mail transport had other needs. Around a dozen people a day were employed on *avisos*, plus a few cabin boys and other youth and *mozos* recruited as seaman apprentices. The ships chosen to serve as *avisos* had to be fast, light, and easily maneuvered. It should be noted that, although these ships had to carry water, food, passengers, and, at times, merchandise, the priority was high-speed navigation. Generally speaking, caravels, pataches, tartanes, and schooners were chosen. The ideal capacity of a *navío de aviso*

ranged between forty and eighty tons.<sup>78</sup> However, on several occasions larger or more deteriorated ships were allowed to carry mail. This was viable when there were no other transport options, or when no ship in suitable condition was available. In any case, these vessels were not required to carry large quantities of weapons or ammunition to defend themselves.<sup>79</sup> In case of attack, captains were obliged to throw their correspondence into the water before it was confiscated by the enemy. Neither was mail subject to paying transport insurance, as other overseas trade goods were.<sup>80</sup>

### A SERVICE FOR MANY VASSALS?

The handwritten content that circulated in *navíos de aviso* was not subject to censorship. On the contrary, the Spanish authorities expected official and private correspondence to circulate on *avisos* without being read. The Crown and its officials defended this right to confidentiality in a number of documents.<sup>81</sup> Nor did the inquisitorial courts have the power to delegate agents to inspect the content that circulated in *avisos*. This principle continued to operate in the same way after the secretariats of the Holy Office were installed in Mexico and Lima, from 1569 to 1571. A good way for the captain and *maestre*, or second-in-command, of a *navío de aviso* to inspire confidence in the service was to comply with the protocols for protecting content. A violation, if discovered, would be considered a negative precedent when subsequently applying for a postal transport license.

In theory, any individual was free to send mail on an *aviso*. There was no standard that defined an “ideal” user of these ships. Since the early sixteenth century, the Crown had authorized all “captains, *maestres*, and sailors” to transport letters on transatlantic vessels.<sup>82</sup> The principle was maintained with the emergence of the *aviso* system and supported a postal system that did not create too many barriers to sending correspondence. According to the Habsburg conception, no seaman should “hinder” transatlantic communication of vassals. Similarly, although the illiterate were forced to resort to literate intermediaries to write their letters, there were no legal limitations preventing them from using the *aviso* services.

Men made extensive use of the transatlantic postal exchange service, but there are also records of women sending correspondence in this way. For example, Ana López stated that she had written to her mother several times following her arrival in America.

<sup>78</sup> Así mismo está bien, Madrid, May 26, 1573, in AGI, Indiferente, 1956, L.1, fs. 105v–106v.

<sup>79</sup> Carta del procurador [Diego de] Vera, Panama, May 27, 1571, in AGI, Panama 13, ramo 11, n.º 44.

<sup>80</sup> Hilario Casado Alonso, “Seguros marítimos y comercio de esclavos en la época de Felipe II,” in *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, 79, n.º 2, Sevilla, 2022, pp. 515–541, available at <https://estudiosamericanos.revistas.csic.es/index.php/estudiosamericanos/article/view/958> [accessed August 20, 2024].

<sup>81</sup> El virrey del Perú nos escribió, Nombre de Dios, September 5, 1575, in AGI, Panama, 33, n.º 100.

<sup>82</sup> Real Provisión, Valladolid, August 14, 1509, in AGI, Indiferente, 418, L.2, fs. 43r–43v.

According to a document dated 1571, this woman was accustomed to sending letters whenever “a[n *aviso*] ship” was available.<sup>83</sup> Like other interlocutors, López complained of long waits for replies from her relatives. However, the woman did not blame the *navío de aviso* system for this lack of communication. On the contrary, she stated that her cousin wrote quite frequently without any of his letters “getting lost.” In later letters, Ana López also pointed out the importance of learning to write and the increased importance when one traveled to America. In her opinion, it proved advantageous to those who were forced to emigrate from Castile. In fact, López suggested that her two nieces be taught to read and write before embarking on their journey to America.<sup>84</sup>

The ecclesiastical sectors established links with the *navíos de aviso* through different mechanisms. In addition to sending letters, many priests and nuns traveled on the mail ships as passengers.<sup>85</sup> This mechanism was complementary to the exchange of information. Indeed, the *avisos* represented an affordable means of transporting Christian religious personnel quickly and safely. Passengers were free to negotiate the cost of transport and meals with ship owners, but had to be in possession of the corresponding travel permit granted through prior authorization from the Castilian authorities. In turn, the clergy were authorized to carry non-official letters in their belongings on transatlantic crossings.

In principle, priests and nuns were not required to pay for the transport of correspondence related to their religious duties. Initially, this benefit covered all religious orders and the Holy Office tribunal during the sixteenth century. However, it was necessary to impose certain limits on the permissiveness with which the ecclesiastical sectors sent correspondence on the *avisos*. In 1583, the *receptor* of the tribunal of the Inquisition of Mexico, Juan de Saracho, was forced to pay for a personal letter sent along with other official documents produced by the institution for which he worked.<sup>86</sup> Of course, enforcing controls to prevent church and government officials from sending personal letters was complicated and gave rise to ambiguities.

As one might imagine, bishops, abbesses, teaching nuns, secretaries of the Inquisition, and other “notable” members of the Church were among the most frequent users of the *avisos* system. The correspondence they produced was considered indispensable for the functioning of the church and the spiritual governance of the Indies. In practice, ecclesiastical letters were often loaded into the holds of *avisos* in the same boxes as official correspondence. However, certain distinctive features could be added to the packages to distinguish this written information from that related to justice, government, or royal finance.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Deseada señora y madre, Mexico, May 15, 1571, in AGI, Indiferente, 2053, n.º 99.

<sup>84</sup> The letter from which this information is extracted was dated the same day as the previous one. See: Deseado señor y padre, Mexico, May 15, 1571, in AGI, Indiferente, 2053, n.º 99.

<sup>85</sup> For example, in 1564, several friars from Cantabria, Aragon, Valladolid, and Salamanca were sent to New Spain. See: Memoria de religiosos, Seville, February 15, 1564, in AGI, Indiferente, 2003.

<sup>86</sup> Solicitud de Juan de Saracho, Mexico, April 4, 1583, in Archivo General de la Nación de México (hereinafter AGN/Mexico), New Spain, Inquisition, volume 133, file 29, f. 306r.

<sup>87</sup> See: En otras tengo escrito, Cartagena de Indias, February 19, 1543, in AGI, Santa Fe, 228.

Some of these are still visible in the headers of letters or on the sheets of paper that served as envelopes to protect documents. Other marks, however, were affixed by offices such as the secretariats of the Council of the Indies, for archival purposes.

Nor, from a legal point of view, was there any impediment for indigenous people, mestizos, or slaves to choose the *avisos* as a postal option. We know that several petitions made by American *caciques*, or indigenous leaders, reached Spain on *avisos*. Inside the New Kingdom of Granada, famous *caciques* such as Alonso de Silva and Diego de Torre used the *navíos de aviso* to send letters regarding disputes over inheritances and *encomiendas*, or their rights as indigenous-mestizos (sons of a Spanish father and an indigenous mother).<sup>88</sup> And as with other sectors such as merchants, indigenous people tended to view the *navíos de aviso* as the most formal postal mechanism, in other words, the mechanism best supported by the Crown.

We should not, however, rule out the possibility that letters written in indigenous language were also sent to Spain by means of the *avisos*. For example, in 1567 a group of ten *caciques* sent a letter to Philip II which, due to its characteristics and timing, is very likely to have arrived in Spain with the official correspondence transported in a *navío de aviso* traveling to Spain in 1568.<sup>89</sup> In the text, the indigenous people recognized the need for the King to be formally “notified” of the progress of evangelization of the indigenous people.

On the other hand, we are certain that replies to several memoranda and petitions sent by indigenous people to the Council of the Indies traveled in specialized mail transport vessels.<sup>90</sup> The *navíos de aviso*, when available, could be perceived as the natural channel for circulation of written information between the authorities and any type of vassal, even if the latter was not of Castilian origin. And the ships also transported people born in America (as long as they had a permit) who chose to appear before the Castilian courts to defend their causes. For example, lawyers or indigenous people traveled to Europe, given the complexity of achieving better legal results in America.

Under similar conditions, Afro populations created links with the *navíos de aviso*. These sectors could transmit information or travel on ships dedicated to transporting mail. In 1571, “a[n enslaved] black man who had been with the French” arrived in Panama on a *navío de aviso*, after having been “rescued” in the Caribbean by the Spanish.<sup>91</sup> But Afro-descendant men and women, as long as they carried an acceptable permit or justification for circulation, were allowed to travel on mail ships. Castilian bureaucrats assigned a post in America also traveled on different *navíos de aviso* with their “servants” and enslaved persons. It was not unusual for judges and governors, to cite one case, to travel transatlantically on the *avisos* with their belongings and Afro-descendant service personnel.

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<sup>88</sup> Cfr. Don Alonso de Silva and Diego de Torre, Santa Fe de Bogotá, April 8, 1575, in AGI, Indiferente, 1387.

<sup>89</sup> See: Carta escrita en su lengua, Yucatán, February 11, 1567, in Archivo Histórico Nacional de España (hereinafter AHNE), Diversos-colecciones, 24, n.º 77.

<sup>90</sup> Sobre que se prorrogue, Madrid, June 23, 1571, in AGNM, Novohispano, Reales Cédulas Duplicadas, vol. 1, BI, exp. 5, fs. 1r–3v.

<sup>91</sup> En treinta de diciembre, Panama, February 20, 1571, in AGI, Panama, 13, ramo 11, n.º 38.

Similarly, a plethora of documents related to topics such as the slave trade or the conditions of enslavement circulated through the *avisos*. This process raised awareness of official forms of transatlantic communication among certain groups of African origin. The *avisos*, in turn, served to transport material evidence from trials involving Afro-descendant populations between two continents. The distribution of various “freedom letters” and other records related to the treatment of enslaved people was also carried out via the *navíos de aviso*.<sup>92</sup>

In addition to a vast array of manuscripts, objects other than letters circulated on the *avisos*. Maps, relics, paintings, or similar objects were considered correspondence. In 1580, the Council of the Indies authorized the transfer of several gifts to the King of China on an *aviso*.<sup>93</sup> In this case, the paintings, fabrics, and objects were considered symbols of diplomatic hospitality. Likewise, to help defend certain American ports, the Council of the Indies frequently approved the transport of military supplies on *navíos de aviso*. Small quantities of artillery, ropes, or gunpowder for the soldiers in American forts circulated on *avisos*.<sup>94</sup>

Similarly, family remittances were considered mail. The merchant Juan Romero recorded that his brother, before dying, had sent a gold *barretilla*, or small bar, worth 100 ducats on a *navío de aviso* sailing from Nombre de Dios.<sup>95</sup> The money was intended for his parents, who lived in a small Andalusian town near Granada. To ensure receipt of remittances in gold or silver, senders usually resorted to executors or business agents, who in most cases had earned a good reputation through their work with merchants. Family remittances sent on *avisos* could be accompanied by handwritten letters indicating how to collect the money at the ports. In Juan Romero’s case, he gave instructions for the gold bar to be claimed at the office of Pedro Núñez, who acted as executor in the city of Seville.

Remittances and *encomiendas* were considered by the Crown to be non-documentary mail indispensable to its vassals. In Europe, at least from the time of the Middle Ages, it was common for gold, silver, and pearls to circulate as correspondence.<sup>96</sup> However, after 1570, the Crown restricted the conditions under which mail-carrying ships could transport tradable goods that might encourage illegal trafficking on *avisos*. The transport of gold, silver, indigo, fabrics, and other highly valuable items as mail was explicitly prohibited.

In 1583, a lawyer traveling as a passenger on an *aviso* was accused of having unloaded contraband in the Portuguese port of Portimão. According to the testimony of a prosecutor from the Casa de la Contratación, the accused was carrying “lots of gold,

<sup>92</sup> For example, we have a copy of a royal decree sent to the viceroy of New Spain. See: Conde de la Coruña pariente nuestro, Elvas, February 3, 1581, in AGI, Mexico, 1091, L.9, fs. 245v–246r.

<sup>93</sup> Presidente y oidores, Madrid, June 8, 1580, in AGI, Indiferente, 1956, L.3, fs. 96v–98r.

<sup>94</sup> Dando aviso de corsarios, Aranjuez, July 24, 1572, in AGI, Santo Domingo, 899, L.2, fs. 200v–201r.

<sup>95</sup> Deseados padres, Nombre de Dios, April 10, 1568, in AGI, Indiferente, 2080.

<sup>96</sup> Antoine Destemberg, “Acteurs et espaces de la renommée universitaire. Jalons pour une histoire des messagers de l’université de Paris à la fin du Moyen Âge,” in *Revue Historique*, n.º 678, vol. 2, Paris, 2016, pp. 3–32, available at <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-historique-2016-2-page-3?lang=fr> [accessed August 20, 2024].

*silver, pearls, stones, jewels, and other things.*<sup>97</sup> In these cases, the Spanish authorities were charged with the difficult task of clarifying whether the objects had been sold or transferred as correspondence. In any case, gifts, donations, or voluntary contributions were permitted as long as they were not part of a commercial transaction.

The idea behind such restrictions was to prevent the *avisos* from becoming a driving force behind smuggling. For this reason, over the years the Crown made an effort to reinforce controls aimed at preventing the circulation of objects and people “out of the register.”<sup>98</sup> An attempt was also made to prohibit the circulation of printed books that could be marketed. However, a rigorous inspection of everything in circulation was challenging. Passengers were allowed to carry used books, pamphlets, or printed/handwritten papers in their luggage, as these were considered items for personal use.

Ship’s captains and pilots were authorized to carry several boxes and suitcases. Sailors (*marinería*), on the other hand, could only carry one piece of luggage. In any case, there was permissiveness and the limits varied depending on conditions. The above explains why the King was forced to issue royal decrees clarifying and authorizing exceptions. By 1580, several people had been convicted of trafficking marketable goods illegally on *navíos de aviso*.<sup>99</sup>

#### LOGISTICAL STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES

The Crown used various logistical strategies to dispatch and implement the *aviso* system. These procedures became more strict and specialized over time. Ships that sailed with mail were managed by the Casa de la Contratación, as this activity was related to the traffic to and from the Indies. The Casa de la Contratación, established in Seville, was the guarantor that allowed the *navíos de aviso* to navigate the Atlantic. It was clear that the Andalusian capital had access to the personnel considered most qualified to ensure that correspondence transported on ships was handled in an appropriate manner. Likewise, and as in other spheres of Atlantic trade, Seville was chosen because it was a consolidated internal port, with adequate technical infrastructure and political and economic groups influential in traffic to America. The Casa de la Contratación was responsible for empirical verification of the *avisos*. Its principal functions included selection of ships, authorization of crew, drafting of navigation permits, and negotiating all contractual elements related to the vessels. In effect, the Casa de la Contratación acted as the negotiator, appraiser, and tribunal for addressing the needs arising from the *avisos*. In the event of a breach of terms during navigation, the parties involved could file a complaint with one of the Casa’s prosecutors. As we will see,

<sup>97</sup> Acusación contra el licenciado Ariza, Seville, September 15, 1583, in AGI, Contratación, 138 B.

<sup>98</sup> Registro [...] de ciertos esclavos, Seville, August 21, 1602, in AGI, Contratación, 1141, n.º 1, ramo 4.

<sup>99</sup> Real disposición, Madrid, January 28, 1578, in AGI, Indiferente, 427, L.29, fs. 129r–130r.

contracts included detailed conditions such as the remuneration due those involved in the trip, the objects that could be transported, the route to be taken, and all conditions under which the mail would be transported. A reconstruction of the functioning of the *avisos* has been possible largely thanks to records of these activities found in archives.

Indeed, it was for archival purposes that an important bureaucratic apparatus was activated. And thanks to the actions of this body of officers, private individuals could be contracted to transport official and private mail across the Atlantic. In this sense, the interaction between the Casa de la Contratación and the Council of the Indies was essential. In fact, *navíos de aviso* could not sail without authorization from *both* institutions. The Casa de la Contratación in Seville provided nautical and legal foundations for the dispatch of mail ships. For its part, the Council of the Indies—established in Madrid in 1561—provided political support to shipments and administered justice in complex situations. In theory, the Council of the Indies was supposed to be informed of all processes related to the circulation of the *avisos* and had final say over the provision of this service.<sup>100</sup>

Despite this institutional duality, the Casa de la Contratación was responsible for a large part of the practical tasks related to management of the *navíos de aviso*. The Sevillian institution developed an unprecedented specialization in postal distribution and management. Various agents linked to the Casa carried out the physical inspections of the mail transport ships and helped define the conditions under which trips to the Indies could take place. Sailors, messengers, travelers, king's officials, and unofficial agents of different origins all interacted in this process. Likewise, the lieutenant of the Correo Mayor of the Indies resided in the city of Seville from 1514 and, from 1543, the city was the headquarters of the main corporation and commercial court of America, the Consulado de Cargadores a Indias de Sevilla (Consulate of Shippers to the Indies of Seville).<sup>101</sup> All these actors encouraged the continuous exchange and production of overseas correspondence distributed within the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>102</sup> Year after year, dozens of messengers circulated throughout Andalusia carrying information on “Indian” affairs.

A delivery logistics system for a *navío de aviso* was activated in the event of a prolonged absence of postal exchange. Although, ideally, a ship would be sent every six months, in practice there were several factors that affected *aviso* schedules. In 1573, a royal decree sent from Madrid urged the Casa de la Contratación to debate the “convenience” of sending a *navío de aviso* from Seville with the news brought by the fleets that had arrived in Spain.<sup>103</sup> Proposals of this type could originate in the Council of the Indies, the Casa de la Contratación, or from merchants, through the Consulate of Shippers to the Indies, all of whom could claim the urgent need for sending an *aviso*. If this

<sup>100</sup> Real Cédula [...] comunicándose que se recibió aviso, Seville, June 16, 1563, in AGI, Indiferente, 1966, L.14, fs. 387r.

<sup>101</sup> González Martínez, “Mail Concessions for...,” *op. cit.*, pp. 290–293.

<sup>102</sup> Francisco Fernández López, *La Casa de la Contratación...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 91–122.

<sup>103</sup> Real cédula a los oficiales de la Casa de la Contratación, Madrid, November 23, 1561, in AGI, Indiferente, 1966, L.14, fs. 109v–110r.

need coincided with existing plans to send a fleet or armada, assurances were made for the mail ship to set sail with these convoys. Otherwise, the process could be initiated autonomously to meet the communication needs of the Castilian possessions in the Indies or the authorities in Spain. The difference between the two strategies was that when an *aviso* sailed with the fleets, the captains general of these fleets had a greater role in the management of the *aviso*. In other words, the captain or admiral of the fleet acted as an intermediary when ships with correspondence were sent as part of a convoy. Otherwise, the ships in question had a more direct relationship with the royal institutions.

A crucial part of the process was choosing a vessel that could potentially act as a *navío de aviso*. Captains, *maestres*, or ship owners could nominate their ships for service. There was no policy of investing in a permanent fleet of ships to transport correspondence. For this reason, most ships were rented. The decision to acquire a fleet of *navíos de aviso* would have entailed a significant investment for the Crown, as well as ongoing expenditures for their maintenance. In other words, the open market made it possible to choose and reject a *navío de aviso*. This dynamic allowed for the use of various types of private ships, as long as they were small and in acceptable condition. In 1577, a vessel of “any kind” was urgently sought to report on the fall of Fort Santa in Florida.<sup>104</sup> When ships were in short supply, or when the Crown received an economically attractive offer, a vessel slightly larger than an average caravel or tartane might be accepted. However, this might also result in higher costs for crew and maintenance, which were to be avoided.

Once the need for communication was identified, the ship selection process had to be carried out. In the medium term, a proper technical inspection was the best way to ensure the economic viability of a service. A poor choice of vessel could have serious consequences, such as the loss of the ship in America or the need for repairs in Caribbean shipyards. Repairs were possible in the Indies, but they could be expensive, due especially to the scarcity of certain materials and the costs of feeding the grounded crew. Choosing a good pilot was also extremely important. As in the commercial field, pilots had to have a license and pass an examination endorsed by the Casa de la Contratación. Experience was key; in fact, it was not unusual to record the number years of navigational experience in licenses, along with a brief description of the person’s career.<sup>105</sup> The relevant documentation was attached to the original registration files kept by the Casa de la Contratación.

For an *aviso* to be allowed to sail it had to undergo a *visita*, or an inspection *in situ*.<sup>106</sup> Ideally, *visitas* were carried out by one or two captains delegated by the Casa de la Contratación, along with at least one scribe. For example, Arias Maldonado and Rodrigo

<sup>104</sup> Carta de la Audiencia de Panama, Panama, April 12, 1579, in AGI, Panama, 13, ramo 18, n.º 89.

<sup>105</sup> Registro del navío: San Miguel, Seville, May 8, 1592, in AGI, Contratación, 1098, n.º 2, ramo 4.

<sup>106</sup> Varias visitas de avisos, Sevilla; Sanlúcar de Barrameda and other cities, several days in 1586, in AGI, Contratación, 4840 A.

de Vargas formed a regular inspection team in Andalusian ports.<sup>107</sup> Once the mail ships reached the New World, and before their return, they were placed under the surveillance of officers of the American royal treasury delegated by the Casa de la Contratación.<sup>108</sup> As with the outbound voyages, American *visitadores*, or inspectors, were granted the power to travel to the ports where the *navíos de aviso* docked to verify them. In both procedures, the material conditions of the vessels were evaluated. The ship's general condition was appraised, including the state of the hulls, rigging, masts, and sails. During these on-site appraisals, inspectors also reviewed a preliminary list of the crew members and other sailors scheduled to make the transatlantic crossing.<sup>109</sup> It was essential to ensure that none of the proposed sailors was traveling in order to avoid criminal prosecution or had any obvious reason to flee. A report was then drawn up to estimate how long it might take to rig or prepare the vessel. After that, the inspectors might return to the ships several times before the final inspection, receiving remuneration and travel expenses for each mobilization.

To authorize the landing of a *navío de aviso*, the prior and the consuls from the Casa de la Contratación coordinated to draft a license, after agreeing on costs and carrying out inspections. This document was the contract that defined the conditions for providing postal service and contained the responsibilities and rights of those in charge of the ship. The *maestre* or captain—who was sometimes also the owner of the ship—signed as the party responsible for the voyage. Other times, the permit holders had rented the ship on behalf of a third party. And the itineraries for the Atlantic routes along which the ship was allowed to circulate were also specified in the contract. This document became the *aviso's* navigation guide and adherence to it was mandatory, except in cases of proven contingency.

The itineraries in the contract indicated the routes that ships were to follow and the places where they would be allowed to stop to stock up on essentials such as fresh water. Unjustified failure to comply with an itinerary was considered a serious offense. In 1584, a group of sailors were charged a fine of 10,000 *maravedis* and spent several days in prison for apparently acting in complicity to carry out an unauthorized stop. The investigation was carried out by a prosecutor from the Casa de la Contratación and supported by the testimony of several witnesses.<sup>110</sup> This definition of routes was also a measure taken to prevent smuggling or the unloading of unregistered goods.

Naturally, the *navíos de aviso* were exposed to the usual perils of Atlantic navigation. There were captures, shipwrecks, and accidents that required handling by the Castilian institutions. Situations of this nature were attended to in different ways. In 1569, the San Nicolás voyaged from the port of Nombre de Dios (today Panama) to Cádiz. When it was a third of the way across the Atlantic, the ship was intercepted and seized

<sup>107</sup> I suggest consulting the letter dated November 7, 1579. See: A esta hora hemos recibido, Seville, November 7, 1579, in AGI, Contratación, 5168.

<sup>108</sup> Nuestros capitanes generales, Lisbon, June 4, 1582, in AGI, Mexico, 1064, L.2, fs. 85v–86r.

<sup>109</sup> Francisco Suarez [...] a Cartagena, Seville, [January 25?] 1586, in AGI, Contratación, 4840 A.

<sup>110</sup> Acusación contra el licenciado Ariza, Seville, September 15, 1584, in AGI, Contratación, 138 B.

by a “Turkish” ship.<sup>111</sup> The contract covering this voyage included authorization from the authorities for the San Nicolás to circulate under the guardianship of the Flota de Indias, which planned to make a return voyage between 1569 and 1570. After the ship was seized, the vessel and its crew were taken to the African coast for an inspection of the goods being transported. But *navíos de aviso* rarely carried valuable goods or those that were in themselves particularly coveted. Apparently, the San Nicolás had been in use for several years and was poorly equipped, in part because it had sailed under the “protection” of the fleet. In cases like this one, the kidnappers may have used an old extortion technique: demanding a ransom for the release of the prisoners, the ship, and any correspondence that had not been thrown into the sea.<sup>112</sup> This strategy sought to guarantee certain monetary resources in exchange for the release of the captured objects and people, without having to sell the ship.

In the case of the San Nicolás, the King authorized payment of the ransom for the release of the captured people and ship. The captors released a group of people to notify of the incident and serve as mediators in the negotiations. The money for the ransom had to come from the *arcas de la avería*, a tax that the Casa de la Contratación charged vessels that traded within jurisdiction of the Andalusian port. Upon arriving in Seville, the *aviso*'s superior officer, Juan Catalán, (the principal authority for direction of this ship) filed a petition to claim the 600 ducats that the Captain General of the fleet and the Casa de la Contratación had agreed to pay him for the round trip to America. Despite the opposition of several members of the Casa de la Contratación, the court of the Council of the Indies recognized Juan Catalán's claim in two instances.<sup>113</sup> According to the Casa de la Contratación, Juan Catalán took several risks while sailing the ship, including separating from the convoy and inducing the ship's capture. However, the Council of the Indies found these accusations weak and forced the Casa de la Contratación to pay what was agreed to in the contract. Prevailing in this case was the fact that the bulk of the mail had reached its destination and the lives of the seafaring vassals had been protected. Undoubtedly, the voyage of the San Nicolás was a bust, since the ransom had to be paid, along with all the expenses related to the journey. Nevertheless, the Crown's highest authorities were willing to accept these losses, which demonstrates the King's support for the service.

Cases like the preceding demonstrate the way in which the Crown managed *navíos de aviso*. The vicissitudes of navigation required flexibility. In 1580, the Nuestra Señora de la Esperanza was pursued by French corsairs. Taking advantage of the maneuverability of the caravel that made the voyage, the pilot sought protection by diverting the ship to the port of Vigo in the region of Galicia.<sup>114</sup> Thus, the arrival in Cadiz did not take

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<sup>111</sup> “Turkish,” in this context, referred to a vessel that was probably Arab. These crews, however, were often ethnically diverse and mixed.

<sup>112</sup> Proceso antecedente actuado ante el Consejo, Seville, June 16, 1569, in AGI, Justicia, 893, n.º 1, pieza 2.

<sup>113</sup> Proceso antecedente actuado ante el Consejo, Seville, June 17, 1569, in AGI, Justicia, 893, n.º 1, pieza 2.

<sup>114</sup> El licenciado Hurtado de Medina, Seville, March 19, 1580, in AGI, Justicia, 821, n.º 1, ramo 1.

place as expected. In a situation like this, a detailed investigation could be carried out to check for signs of smuggling or irregular practices. Shipwrecks also called for the collection of information in the form of testimonies that revealed facts that were perhaps unknown.<sup>115</sup> In these cases, *navíos de aviso* were more vulnerable given that accidents sometimes had disastrous effects for those responsible for the voyages. However, both the authorities in Castile and the Indies ratified the advantages of encouraging *avisos*. Captures or shipwrecks were not reason enough to justify cancellation of the service in the early years. In fact, and despite the shipwreck of an *aviso* that had caused a stir a few months earlier, the King urged Viceroy Luis de Velasco to create several shipyards in New Spain, in order to build “elongated” ships that would travel with news to Europe on a monthly basis.<sup>116</sup>

Although the Spanish authorities tried to ensure that *navíos de aviso* circulated with the Indies Fleets, this protocol could not be maintained. Little by little, the allocation of “separate” licenses to *avisos* became more frequent. Neither was it uncommon for the Council of the Indies to authorize *avisos* to travel to America alone and return under the protection of a fleet.<sup>117</sup> Insisting on the alliance between convoys and *navíos de aviso* could have revived an old problem: the extreme dependence on commercial and military fleets. Instead, a good way to strengthen the *aviso* system was to grant these ships certain navigational freedoms. This autonomy also opened the door to an increase in the capacity for postal exchange within the empire. In 1573, the Council of the Indies asked the Casa de la Contratación and the Consulado de Comerciantes to study the “convenience” of modifying the system’s initial structure in order to allow *navíos de aviso* to sail independently of the fleets.<sup>118</sup> The proposal shows the interest in integrating different sectors into this type of decision-making and the King’s willingness not to block the autonomous circulation of the *navíos de aviso*.

#### MORE “LOOSE” SHIPS TO COMMUNICATE THE EMPIRE

To avoid dependence on fleets, a hybrid model began to take shape. This allowed *avisos* to sail independently of any convoy. If circumstances prevented the formation of a fleet, it was entirely valid and legal to authorize the navigation of a “loose” *aviso*. The interest in communicative supply and flexibility in the overseas postal model prevailed. Likewise, there was no yearly minimum or maximum number of *navíos de aviso* allowed to sail. Even

<sup>115</sup> This practice continued into the sixteenth century. Please consult: Autos de la comisión dada al doctor Bartolomé Núñez, Sevilla, [various dates] 1609-1610, in AGI, Contratación, 77 C, n.º 7.

<sup>116</sup> Real Cédula de Luis de Velasco, El Escorial, November 1, 1589, in AGI, Indiferente, 427, L.30, fs. 425r-426r.

<sup>117</sup> Para que se despache, Madrid, February 24, 1576, in AGI, Indiferente, 1956, L.1, fs. 331v-332r.

<sup>118</sup> Navío de Aviso a Nueva España, San Lorenzo, March 11, 1573, in AGI, Indiferente, 1956, L.1, fs. 63r-63v.

in months considered dangerous for navigation, several charters authorized the departure of these ships independently, outside the convoy, prioritizing the communication needs of the Atlantic possessions and the Castilian authorities.<sup>119</sup>

The voyages of *navíos de aviso* were usually contracted as round trips or “*viaje y tornaviaje*” (voyage and return voyage).<sup>120</sup> This format was intended to guarantee postal services on both sides of the Atlantic. Once in America, the viceroys and the courts were responsible for monitoring the return of mail ships. Famous viceroys such as Martín de Enríquez and Francisco de Toledo included in their correspondence valuable details regarding the flow of *navíos de aviso*.<sup>121</sup> Local port authorities were an essential part of managing the logistics of *avisos* in the Indies. Under such a structure, the governors of Havana, Veracruz, Panama, and Cartagena de Indias had a close relationship with the *navíos de aviso*. In this respect we can highlight their agency in reporting or denouncing certain irregularities related to the circulation of mail ships. For example, *audiencia* presidents communicated constant requests for *avisos* and were even authorized to send ships in the event of a justified emergency or eventuality. Ship *maestre* Hernando Yáñez received the important sum of 902 ducats for having traveled to Spain (from Havana) with news of Francis Drake’s attack on Cartagena de Indias.<sup>122</sup> The decision to send the ship was made by the governor of Cuba and supported in Castile. The measure of proportionality of this payment indicates approximately 10 percent of the total cost of a caravel in seaworthy condition.

Financing of *navíos de aviso* depended on several sources. By 1572, the Casa de la Contratación estimated an average price of 12,000 *pesos de a ocho* (about 8,722 Castilian ducats) for a round trip to America by a *navío de aviso*.<sup>123</sup> Many of the costs related to the navigation of *avisos* were covered by the aforementioned “*avería*” tax. This money was to be used to cover the transport of official correspondence and the administrative logistics of the service. There were also other ways of making the circulation of the *navíos de aviso* economically attractive and viable. For example, persons in charge of an *aviso* were allowed to carry various goods to be sold at the port of destination. These types of commercial permits granted to the *avisos* were known as *permisiones*. Permits, however, were gradually implemented, as the *avisos* gained in experience.

Among the permissions granted to mail ships were the authorizations to transport products such as vinegar, wine, brandy, olives, and fabrics. In 1587, a general authorization was granted for *navíos de aviso* to transport 600 *varas* of linen between Spain and

<sup>119</sup> In fact, *navíos de aviso* from Tierra Firme could leave several months before the fleet to request that all available “gold and silver” be prepared. See: Para que se despache, Madrid, February 24, 1576, in AGI, Indiferente, 1956, L.1, fs. 331v–332r.

<sup>120</sup> Carta acordada, Madrid, 1580, in AGI, Indiferente, 1956, L.3, fs. 88r–89v.

<sup>121</sup> Various allusions have been made to this topic, see especially: Correspondencia de Martín de Enríquez, Mexico, [various dates] 1577–1586, in AGI, Mexico, 20; Correspondencia de Francisco Toledo, [various dates] 1572–157, Lima, in AGI, Lima 28 B.

<sup>122</sup> Se debe pagar a Hernando Yáñez, Madrid, August 27, 1586, in AGI, Santa Fe, 1, n.º 74.

<sup>123</sup> Refieren en sus peticiones, Seville, January 19, 1572, in AGI, Contratación, 5168.

America.<sup>124</sup> Permissions were more limited on return voyages, especially to prevent the trafficking of silver, gold, and emeralds. On their return to Europe, ship captains could obtain a permit to transport small quantities of sugar, cocoa, tobacco, or carmine.<sup>125</sup> Cargo permits allowed *avisos* to obtain financial compensation in addition to the *avería* tax, which helped pay the crew's salary and the costs of supplies.

Usually, goods transported on *avisos* were exempt from taxes or had a reduced tax obligation. In 1586, the King himself ordered his royal treasury officials "not to charge customs duties" on certain goods arriving on the *navíos de aviso*.<sup>126</sup> Two different models operated and overlapped. In one, the goods listed in the permit belonged to the Crown, and, in the other, the goods were the property of the *maestres*, captains, or other individuals. Thus, mail ship operators could obtain significant financial benefits by combining the salary they received for the postal transport service with the profits derived from the sale of goods transported with a permit. Both models could integrate the overall compensation granted those responsible for the *aviso*.

Repairs to vessels on the outbound journey, provisions for the return voyage, and other unforeseen contingencies might also require funds beyond those provided for in the permits. During the first three decades of *aviso* operations, whether they travelled with the Indies Fleet or independently, the required resources were provided by the public treasury. In 1590, the royal treasury of New Spain paid for the transport and purchase of gunpowder supplied to a *navío de aviso*.<sup>127</sup> These items were in addition to the advances provided by the Casa de la Contratación before the journey to America. Likewise, in 1569, the Council of the Indies approved the reimbursement of certain extraordinary expenses covered by pilot Esteban Gómez in the port of Veracruz out of his own funds.<sup>128</sup> The viceroys had to pay using the money earmarked for managing the movement of messengers between ports, capitals, and other distribution centers.

During the second half of the sixteenth century, improvements were made to a number of mechanisms that helped oversee the overseas postal transport. For example, Hispanic institutions introduced improvements to the "libros de despachos de oficio" (dispatch books), or inventories of documentation sent to America. These *libros* informed institutions such as the Council of the Indies of the type of letters that had been sent to Andalusian ports for transport on overseas voyages.<sup>129</sup> Likewise, the books made

<sup>124</sup> Por cuanto por parte, Madrid, June 30, 1587, in AGI, Mexico, 1092, L.12, fs. 56r–56v.

<sup>125</sup> At present, the data allow us to infer that the permit, strangely enough, exceeded half of the cargo capacity of the *navíos de aviso*. That is to say, if on average the capacity of an *aviso* caravel was 60 tons, the permit could authorize a maximum of 20–30 tons.

<sup>126</sup> Real Cédula a Lazaro Martinez de Villadiego, San Lorenzo, June 19, 1586, in AGI, Indiferente, 1952, L.3, fs. 114v–115r.

<sup>127</sup> Para que Juan de Velasco, Mexico, November 22, 1590, in AGNM, Novohispano, General de Parte, vol. 4, exp. 53, fs. 1r–19v.

<sup>128</sup> Esteban Gómez, piloto de la nao *El Espiritu Santo*, Seville, September 18, 1568, in AGI, Justicia, 894, n.º 5.

<sup>129</sup> Several inventories of this type can be found here: Registro: despachos de oficio a Indias, Madrid, Seville and other cities, February 16, 1567 to May 7, 1576, in AGI, Indiferente, 1505, L.1.

it possible to corroborate the date on which a document had been sent and the general subject matter. In the event that an *aviso* was lost or shipwrecked, the aforementioned devices could be used to reissue a duplicate of the missing correspondence.<sup>130</sup> Dispatch books did not usually include inventories of ecclesiastical and private correspondence, but they did lead to a documentary practice that allowed tracking of overseas letters.

*Memorias de cartas* (reports of letters) were also among the devices that helped monitor overseas navigation processes. In 1588, a series of letters was registered as having traveled on a *navío de aviso* sailing outside the Indies Fleet. Unlike dispatch books, the *memorias* did include letters that were not only of an official nature. The *memoria* was signed by Nicolás de Rodas, the ship's *maestre*.<sup>131</sup> Without the signature of the person responsible for the vessel, the inventories or *memorias* were not valid. As seen in the extract in Table 1, an entry from 1588 makes it possible to establish the recipient, the number of pages, and the date of issue of the correspondence. In this case, few details were given about the subject of the letters, but rather general aspects. This condition made sense, since it was intended to protect the confidentiality and secrecy of official, ecclesiastical, and private content. Some letters were shipped in leather packets or wooden crates which protected them from water, rodents, or unauthorized reading during the voyage.

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<sup>130</sup> Sobre el arribo forzoso, Madrid, December 7, 1583, in AGI, Indiferente, 740, n.º 204.

<sup>131</sup> Memoria de las cartas y despachos que remite el virrey marqués de Villamanrique, Mexico, December 15, 1588, AGI, Mexico, 21, n.º 61.

**TABLE 1:** EXTRACT FROM A “REPORT OF LETTERS” (1588).

Reports of letters and dispatches included in this folder for His Majesty from the Viceroy Marquis of Villamanrique, [traveling] on the <i>navío de aviso</i> of <i>maestre</i> Nicholas de Rodas of the fleet of General Martín Pérez de Olazabal	
~	A letter from the aforementioned Viceroy [of New Spain] to Your Majesty, dated in Mexico on November 29 of this year, written on twelve pages in 27 chapters
~	Another letter for Your Majesty from the aforementioned Viceroy, dated November 30 of said year on ten pages in 19 chapters
~	Another from the aforementioned Viceroy, dated December 1st of said year on three sheets in two chapters
~	Another from the aforementioned Viceroy, dated December 4 of said year, written on six pages with twelve chapters
~	Another from December 5 of the said year, with one page and one chapter
~	Another dated December 12th, written on one sheet of paper
~	Another dated December 13th, written on one sheet of paper
~	Another dated December 19 on a single sheet

Source: *Memoria de las cartas y despachos que remite el virrey marqués de Villamanrique*, Mexico, December 15, 1588, AGI, Mexico, 21, n.º 61. The underlining and brackets are the author's.

The number of letters that circulated on an *aviso* varied. For example, we can confirm that, in 1574, the Council of the Indies sent a hundred letters to Sanlúcar de Barrameda. Their final destination was Mexico and Guatemala. Two years later, the number of letters

shipped on another *aviso* was almost half that.<sup>132</sup> These documents were often several pages long (even complete handwritten books) and included duplicates and triplicates. The information was categorized according to topics such as “taxes,” “Indians,” “mercury mines,” or “parishes.” However, it cannot be ignored that only a part of all the information transported on the *navíos de aviso* was recorded in the Council of the Indies’ dispatch books. As stated earlier, often records made no mention of private documents, ecclesiastical documents, and non-documentary shipments sent to the Indies.

The *navíos de aviso* did not require a very large crew. In 1586, the *aviso* San Antonio listed nine people. The ship’s *maestre*, Antonio Díaz, carried information to Tierra Firme for the Viceroy of Peru, in particular. Five people travelled as “gente de mar” (seafarers) and crew, plus a cabin boy, a page, and the *maestre*. To this number various sailors could be added, taken on board to help with the ship’s daily tasks. The Nuestra Señora de la Consolación listed thirteen people, including its pilots and other assistants.<sup>133</sup> A smaller crew cut down on expenses, eliminated the risk of insubordination, and was well-suited to the type of small ships chosen as *navíos de aviso*.

The licenses obtained by *avisos* to travel “loose” lead to new navigation proposals. In 1572, the Casa de la Contratación drafted a proposal to redefine the stopping points for *navíos de aviso*.<sup>134</sup> In the opinion of the president and treasurer of said institution, Havana should operate as a vector of postal distribution to New Spain, the insular Caribbean, and Guatemala. In the case of Tierra Firme (today northern South America), the proposal included a main port in Panama from which small *patache* merchant boats could be dispatched to secondary ports. The project was never implemented, but it did lead to reforms to the system. The above explains why during the period mentioned numerous licenses were issued to sail to Havana and Cartagena de Indias. The plan also suggested that, in the event of attacks, breakdowns, or possible shipwreck, *avisos* might be allowed to sail to Castilian ports located outside Andalusia.

Map 1 shows the overseas postal distribution patterns proposed in 1572 by the officials of the Casa de la Contratación. Proponents of the plan suggested that, “due to the difficulties of this island,” *navíos de aviso* should not be sent to Hispaniola.<sup>135</sup> The map shows that, in keeping with the proposal, there would be three main ports in America: Veracruz, Havana, and Nombre de Dios, all marked with a star [★]. And, on the Castilian side, the ports of the Canary Islands, the Azores, and Cadiz, marked with a star [★]. All three would be authorized to receive *navíos de aviso*. The secondary ports where the

<sup>132</sup> Registro: despachos de oficio a Indias, Madrid, different dates from the year 1567, in AGI, Indiferente, 1505, L.1, fs. 41v–45v.

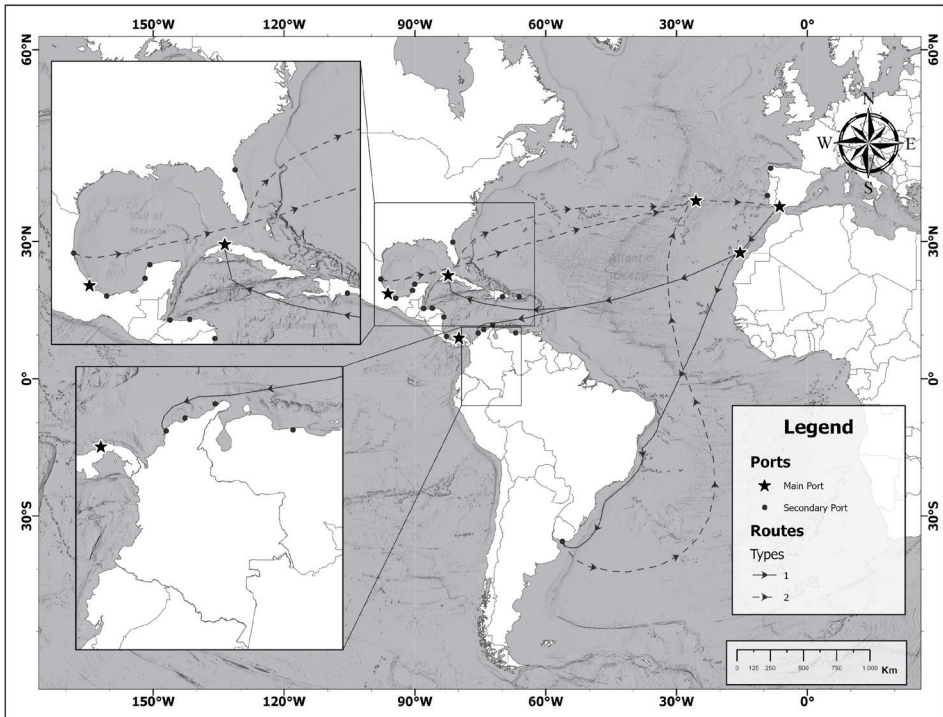
<sup>133</sup> The records mentioned can be found at: Admisiones de naos y primeras visitas, Seville, Sanlúcar de Barrameda and other cities, 1523-1590, in AGI, Contratación, 4840 A.

<sup>134</sup> Refieren en sus peticiones, Seville, January 19, 1572, in AGI, Contratación, 5168.

<sup>135</sup> This coincided with other measures that, among others, reconfigured the location of Santo Domingo (Hispaniola) in the Atlantic during the sixteenth century. See: Juan Jose Ponce Vázquez, *Islanders and Empire: Smuggling and Political Defiance in Hispaniola, 1580–1690*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 56–97.

*patache* boats would sail to pick up and redistribute the mail transported by *avisos* on the transatlantic route are shown with a black dot [•]. This included ports in the current territories of Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Argentina, as well as in Galicia, and even Lisbon, Portugal, from where much of the early colonial Castilian mail was redistributed.

Source: Author's elaboration, based on: Refieren en sus peticiones, Seville, January 19, 1572, in AGI, Contratación, 5168.



**MAP 1:** CASA DE LA CONTRATACIÓN PROJECT FOR THE CIRCULATION OF *NAVÍOS DE AVISO*, BASED ON THE DEMAND FOR CORRESPONDENCE (1572).<sup>136</sup>

The *aviso* system was also closely linked to the flow of news about the Philippines. After the founding of Manila in 1571, *navíos de aviso* carried numerous correspondence related to the Asian colonies. Like many other goods, correspondence related to the

<sup>136</sup> To make it easier for the modern reader to locate the ports, the map retains the current continental borders. It should be noted that, in the sixteenth century, the administrative boundaries of kingdoms, viceroyalties, and governorates, among others, were different. However, this discrepancy does not affect the interpretive utility of the map in the context of the present text.

Philippines had to pass through the territories of New Spain before or after the voyage across the Pacific Ocean. Although the “*nao de China*” route does not seem to have included a project identical to that of the *navíos de aviso*, it was possible to connect both circuits through the New Spain overland routes. From Pacific ports such as Acapulco, San Blas, or Cabo Bandera, “Philippine” mail could be sent to Veracruz (or vice versa). In Veracruz, the *navíos de aviso* picked up correspondence to be carried to Europe.

The *aviso* system provided communicative support for the process of incorporating Cebu, Manila, and other Asian territories into the possessions of the Spanish Empire. Before and after the expeditions promoted by Governor Miguel López de Legazpi (1564–1572), *navíos de aviso* carried numerous correspondence produced or destined for the Philippines. In 1577, members of the Council of the Indies reported the arrival of the Asian mail in Madrid after a year’s journey. The correspondence consisted of a description of “China” as well as letters and objects sent from different points in the Philippine Islands.<sup>137</sup> The aforementioned mail had traveled on a *navío de aviso* that arrived with the Indies Fleet in March. In the Philippines, as in territories such as Venezuela, Guatemala, or Chile, there were no *correos mayores*. The main local authorities and, of course, the sailors were in charge of managing the transport of these correspondences.

#### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Relatively quickly, the notion of a ship responsible for transporting mail and news began to take shape in the Spanish Atlantic. By 1590, the *navíos de aviso* offered a specialized service with several attractive features for a variety of correspondence producers. References to these vessels in official, ecclesiastical, and private sources help us account for the wide impact produced by the emergence of the new overseas postal exchange mechanism analyzed in this article. Part of what made the system unique was that it offered a formal service supervised by the Crown. Given the urgent need for communication, the *navíos de aviso* acquired a special status that justified their disassociation from the Indian Fleets. In fact, the *avisos* were becoming increasingly independent of commercial or military convoys.

The case of the *navíos de aviso* helps to understand the way in which the Spanish Crown understood communication during the sixteenth century. The *avisos* were conceived as an option open to many, not off-limit to private users. On the contrary, through the *avisos* the Crown attempted to ensure a reliable channel for overseas communication to a broad base of vassals and institutions. Giving users somewhat spontaneous access to the service also made the system more robust. Unlike what happened later in the eighteenth century, private and ecclesiastical users were not forced to send their

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<sup>137</sup> Recién abierto, Madrid, March 15, 1577, in AGI, Indiferente, 739, n.º 14.

correspondence through official channels. While on land, the *correo mayor* concessions were applied; at sea the *avisos* were the hinge that made possible transcontinental communication. Until now, historiography has said little about this. The topic seems crucial to understanding the mutual links established by the American, European, African, and Asian populations with an interest in the Spanish Atlantic starting in the late fifteenth century.

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