

THE NEW SPANISH VICEROY AS A NODE IN THE GOVERNMENT CORRESPONDENCE OF AMERICA. JUAN RUIZ DE APODACA Y ELIZA, 1816-1821

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Introduction

19th century historians portrayed the viceroys of America as small sultans or pharaohs who ruled despotically, imposing cruel punishments and arbitrary orders. These shadows lingered into the first half of the 20th century, but thanks to contemporary historiography, they have begun to dissipate as we now have a more nuanced understanding of vice regal regimes. In this vein, this article analyses the institution of the New Spanish Viceroyalty from the perspective of government correspondence. This approach allows us to understand that the viceroy was crucial for harmonising and integrating the heterogeneous territories of America, for which he needed to manage a voluminous archive, receive correspondence and documentation from the provinces, channel them to the king's court, and regularly inform the latter of important events. For all these reasons, the viceroy was a powerful node in government correspondence that linked America with Spain, with the authority to intervene in administrative processes to ensure good governance and the fulfilment of the monarch's will.

Monarchy and viceroys

The Hispanic monarchy operated on a “planetary scale”, as its dominions extended across Europe, America, Africa, and Asia. Historians noted the “titanic effort” and “sophisticated political organisation” required for the “orders issued in Madrid to reach and be executed in such distant points of the planet” (Cardim & Palos, 2012, p. 11; Haring, 1947; and Rivero Rodríguez & Gaudin, 2020). Furthermore, a vast historiography shows that the institution of the viceroyalty was a “logistical and political resource” of great importance for the governance of territories both distant and close to the metropolis as “between the early 16th century and the late 18th century, (the Spanish crown) came to direct up to thirteen viceregal governments” (Cardim & Palos, 2012, p. 17). Viceroys were appointed within the Hispanic peninsula itself: Navarre, Aragon, Catalonia, and Valencia, as well as Portugal, which, along with its possessions, was governed as a viceroyalty under the House of Habsburg between 1581 and 1640; in the Mediterranean: Majorca, Naples, Sicily, and Sardinia. And in America: New Spain and Peru since the 16th century, as well as New Granada and the Rio de la Plata in the 18th century (Vives, 1948; Lalinde Abadía, 1967; Bermúdez, 2004; Bravo Lira, 2004; Tau Anzoátegui, 2004; Ciaramitaro, 2008; Rivero Rodríguez, 2011; and Semboloni, 2014).

Between 1470 and 1516, the Hispanic monarchs employed “absolute vicerealties” to govern their possessions. This model granted unlimited powers to viceroys, which often obstructed communication between subjects and the king and

impeded the administration of justice. Thus, in 1517, dissatisfaction among subjects led to revolts in Sicily and Valencia. Subsequently, when the monarch Charles I of Spain (1500-1558) and his chancellor Mercurino Arborio Gattinara (1465-1530) resumed the office of viceroy to extend it in Europe and implant it in America, between 1516 and the 1530s, they opted for a model of “restricted viceroyalty”. In this latter model, the king’s alter ego was limited by the Councils of the royal court, by legislation framing their authority and powers, as well as by the Courts in the viceregal courts (Rivero Rodríguez, 2011, pp. 80-94). This viceroyalty model was modified and adapted to various circumstances for over three centuries, until 14 July 1840, when the last viceroyalty, that of Navarre, was extinguished (Rivero Rodríguez, 2011, p. 10; and Floristán Imízcoz, 2014).

The New Spanish viceroy

Pedro Cardim and Juan-Lluís Palos (2012) point out that the extensive historiography on viceroys reveals the existence of a “plurality of government formulae” in the Spanish monarchy. All viceroalties were different from each other and varied according to the status of their territories and geopolitical position. The realm of New Spain was founded and incorporated into the Spanish monarchy in 1521 through military conquest for the purpose of evangelisation. In 1528, it was endowed with the Royal Audiencia of Mexico, and subsequently granted the dignity of a colonial viceroyalty in 1535 when the first New Spanish viceroy, Antonio de Mendoza (1490 or 1493-1552), was appointed. From 1535, the viceregal institution operated in North

America for almost 300 years, until 5 July 1821, when the last viceroy –Juan Ruiz de Apodaca y Eliza (1754-1835)– was deposed by the field marshal and inspector general of the army, Francisco Novella (1769-1822).

The viceroyalty of New Spain –founded in 1535– was “restricted” and far from absolute. Although the authority of viceroys was superior and executive, it was regulated by the Council of the Indies established in 1524; by the Royal Audiencia of Mexico established between 1528 and 1535; by the *Recopilación de Leyes de Indias* (1680) (1680); and subsequently by the *Real Ordenanza de intendentes* (1786). Additionally, it should be clarified that viceregal authority varied –in extent and faculties– according to associated offices. In the last quarter of the 18th century, the viceroy had direct involvement in the superior government of the Army and Royal Treasury of the intendancies of Mexico, Puebla, Oaxaca, Veracruz, San Luis Potosí, Guanajuato, and Valladolid de Michoacán. Likewise, he oversaw the administration of justice in these territories, as well as in Yucatán, in his capacity as president of the Audiencia of Mexico; it is worth noting that the viceroy was merely an observer of justice as he had no legal jurisdiction.

On the other hand, the governing authority of the viceroy was limited in New Galicia by the Royal Audiencia of Guadalajara, but not his oversight of the army as Captain General of Mexico. This latter position found limitations to his authority in the Captaincy General of Yucatán, although he did have jurisdiction over the

government of this intendancy as superintendent of the Royal Treasury. Something similar occurred in the Commandancies of the Internal Provinces of the East and West¹, where the authority of the viceroy could be greatly restricted in military matters but not in finance. From this perspective, it is appropriate to understand the viceroy of New Spain as an agent strongly invested with superior supervisory authority, aiming to harmonise the complex array of territories that, with distinct legal personalities, comprised Northern America. The New Spanish viceroys monitored the proper functioning of provincial and local governments, directed the fortifications of the frontiers, and allocated large sums of capital to finance defences along the coasts, islands, and trade routes; such as Veracruz, Santo Domingo, Cuba, and the Floridas in the Gulf of Mexico, as well as Acapulco and the Philippine archipelago in the Pacific Ocean.

The correspondence of viceroys, instrument of superior governance

In addition to the complex and sophisticated machinery of governance in the Spanish monarchy, “government correspondence” played a fundamental role in the control of territories. The Spanish empire functioned as a “State in constant self-correspondence”, following the pattern of ancient Mediterranean empires such as Ptolemaic Egypt and Rome, a subject studied from an epistolary perspective by Armando Petrucci (2018). These great empires, including the Spanish monarchy, operated “thanks to a continuous production of writings (...) sent to their destination,

¹ The Eastern Internal Provinces encompassed Texas, Coahuila, New Santander, and New León. And the Western ones, New Mexico, New Biscay (Chihuahua and Durango), Sonora, and Sinaloa.

linking the centre with the periphery and vice versa, as well as the same minor and peripheral centres among themselves” (Petrucci, 2018, p. 21; and Innis, 1986).

The viceroy of New Spain engaged in government correspondence at two levels: 1) with the Spanish court and 2) with the authorities of the American provinces. Thus, his epistolary communication contributed to the integration of the viceroyalty into the monarchy. On the one hand, the viceroy received orders, edicts, and decrees issued by the king along with his Councils and ministers; it is worth mentioning that he had the authority to postpone and apply such orders at his discretion. And, on the other hand, the viceroy officially published and disseminated the decisions and provisions of the monarch, as well as his own determinations, which were put into practice by provincial and local authorities. At both levels of government –the imperial and the viceregal– viceroys facilitated communication in both directions of the circuit. They transmitted and interpreted the feelings and decisions of the king, but also brought to his attention the concerns, petitions, and needs of the subjects.

Between the 16th and 17th centuries, the American viceroyalties were governed under the poly-synodal scheme of the Habsburgs. In this system, the government correspondence of the viceroys was mainly sent to and from the Council of the Indies and the monarch’s court, which was established in the town of Madrid in 1559 –during the reign of Philip II–. It is worth noting that the Habsburgs managed their correspondence through concessions of the offices of Chief Mail, meaning that certain

families were granted the privilege of administering the postal service in exchange for paying an annual sum (Amadori, 2013; and González, 2015).

During the first half of the 18th century, the Bourbons modified the political structure of the monarchy, giving it a mixed character by adding State ministries to the Councils. Henceforth, the government of America and its viceroys became subject to these ministries, first to the Secretariat of the Navy and the Indies (1714, 1720-1754) and later to the Secretariat of the Indies (1754-1787). The latter was divided into two between 1787-1790 (Grace and Justice and War and Treasury), both of which were extinguished in 1790, and the government of America was distributed among the Secretariats of State, War, Navy, Grace and Justice, and Treasury. This institutional design remained unchanged for 22 years until the Constitution of Cádiz (1812) created a Secretariat for Overseas Governance, which was abolished in 1814 and reinstated in 1820 (Escudero, 2004, p. 106-113).

Under this mixed mode of government (poly-synodal and ministerial), the king had greater freedom to execute his decisions without consulting the corporate bodies of the monarchy. Thus, the government correspondence of the viceroys gradually shifted to the State ministries, as the monarchs of the Bourbon dynasty preferred to use the “reserved channel”² to transmit their orders and provisions (Dubet, 2017). It is noteworthy that, unlike the Habsburgs who granted postal concessions, the

² The “reserved channel” was the direct communication of the king’s orders from his State ministries without the intervention of the Councils (Dubet, 2017, p. 111).

Bourbons monopolised the postal services of America and integrated them into the State in 1764-1769 (Moreno Cabanillas, 2022; and Araneda Riquelme, 2017). Thus, the postal service was considered a vital government organ to strengthen the sovereignty of the king.

The immense epistolary activity of the viceroys led to the formation of a complex archive consisting of their drafts and some of the original letters they received, both from Spain and from within the viceroyalty. At the National Archive of Mexico (AGN), 356 volumes of “Viceregal Correspondence”³ are preserved, covering the years from 1775 to 1821. This colossal archive functioned during the 16th to 18th centuries, and along with the archives of the Royal Treasury and the Royal Audiencia, it formed part of a powerful governance tool that allowed for obtaining information about the king’s employees, tracking specific issues, observing government revenues and expenses, as well as knowing the thousands of determinations and provisions that the viceroys implemented over the centuries. In summary, viceregal correspondence was an instrument for governing from a distance and efficiently.

The last viceroy, correspondence, and good governance

Between 1816 and 1821, the last viceroy of New Spain —Juan Ruiz de Apodaca y Eliza—faced the challenging task of reorganising and regularising the government of the viceroyalty after it became atrophied due to the 1810 insurrection. The civil war

³ One of these volumes contains correspondence from 1664-1665.

had serious consequences: it empowered the army, as it was granted authority over the towns and became indispensable for the movement of goods; it generated forced contributions that annoyed the subjects; it facilitated abuse of the Treasury branches by officials or individuals; and it provided an opportunity for provincial authorities to disregard the viceroy. In this context, good governance was not limited to the equitable distribution of justice, as in times of peace, but also involved moderating the army, preventing the government from abusing the subjects, ensuring that they and the officials respected the Royal Treasury, subjecting the provinces, and directing the counterinsurgency. The intense activity of the last viceroy to restore New Spain generated a voluminous archive of correspondence, which occupies 15 volumes of the “Viceregal Correspondence” section (AGN, Mexico) and contains around 3800 letters (Díaz Barrera, 2023; and Rosales Hernández, 2009). Of course, the documentation generated by his government is not exhausted in this section.

To govern under the aforementioned principles of good governance, it was necessary to meticulously oversee official correspondence and administrative processes, as the viceroy’s supervision and surveillance were carried out precisely through testimonies, reports, correspondence from commissioners and authorities, as well as judicial documents that passed through his secretariat⁴. It is worth analysing two cases that illustrate the viceroy’s intervention to correct anomalies, and also

⁴ It is worth noting that the Secretariat of the Viceroyalty of New Spain was institutionalised by the Bourbons in 1756 (Arnold, 1991, p. 48).

demonstrate the importance of correspondence in monitoring provincial government, as well as linking and framing it within the guidelines of the monarchy.

On 28 February 1817, Viceroy Ruiz de Apodaca wrote to the minister of War, Francisco Bernaldo de Quirós (1763-1837), marquis of Campo Sagrado, to express his dissatisfaction with the orders issued by the previous viceroy, Félix María Calleja (1753-1828), in 1814 granting extraordinary powers to the generals commanding the Internal Provinces of the East and West, as the insurgency had cut off communication to the capital of the viceroyalty, the seat of the Captaincy General of Mexico. The viceroy stated that since 1816, communications had been restored, and there was no reason for the aforementioned generals to deviate from the administrative control of the Captaincy General. Specifically, he found it anomalous that the generals were granting positions, distributing favours (prizes, pensions, and retirements), and creating officers at their discretion, disregarding the viceroy's opinion and seeking the monarch's approval directly. The viceroy became aware of the generals' manoeuvres, however, as they were required to send copies of their orders to the Viceroyalty Secretariat, since salaries and royal grace allocations were controlled from the Captaincy General (AGN, CV, vol. 269, num. 198).

In a representation to the king dated also on 28 February 1817, Ruiz de Apodaca questioned whether the viceroy could be reduced to a conduit for the correspondence and decisions of the provinces of the viceroyalty. In his opinion, no, as the viceroy had

to supervise the legitimacy of the positions created, the ranks granted, as well as the pensions and retirements, to prevent complaints from subordinates and subjects affected by arbitrary decisions. This case is very significant because it shows that indeed the Viceroyalty Secretariat channelled the correspondence and routine documentation of all provinces, including the most distant ones such as the Internal Provinces of the East and West. But the viceroy was not limited to being a mere conduit of government correspondence; on the contrary, his superior authority allowed him to investigate in order to provide certainty and support to all important decisions (AGN, CV, vol. 269, no. 242). The king approved this interpretation of viceregal authority, as on 6 October 1818, he ordered that the commanders of Internal Provinces should adhere to the viceroy in all their determinations (AGN, CV, vol. 275, no. 805).

On the other hand, in a letter dated 22 August 1818, Ruiz de Apodaca informed the minister of Finance, Martín Garay Perales (1771-1822), that when he requested the service records of the employees of the Royal Treasury from the intendant of Yucatán “to give them the corresponding course”, he replied that “he had already sent them directly to the supreme ministry of Finance”. The intendant disregarded the authority of the viceroy as superintendent of the Royal Treasury, so the latter consulted the king whether the intendency of Yucatán “should continue to make its shipments directly (to Madrid) or like the others (intendancies) that carry them out through this General Subdelegated Superintendence of Royal Treasury” (AGN, CV, vol.

275, num. 481). On 20 July 1819, the king decided that the Viceroyalty Secretariat should channel all the documentation of Finance and that the intendancy of Yucatán should adhere to the viceroy in all its administrative procedures (AGN, CV, vol. 279, num. 896). These two cases show that viceroys channelled the government correspondence of the provinces, which allowed them to supervise positions and the distribution of royal grace. Of course, they did not prevent the right of subjects and officials to free communication with the king, but all decisions had to go through their secretariat.

Final reflection

The creation of the New Spanish viceregal institution in the 16th century involved the formation of a complex political and administrative structure tasked with governing and supervising the provinces, capitals, and towns that comprised Northern America. In the 18th century, the viceroy's office professionalised and refined its governance methodologies, closely related to epistolary and archival practices. During the final years of New Spain, between 1816 and 1821, the viceregal institution was tested by insurgency. Viceroy Ruiz de Apodaca endeavoured to pacify the territories and demonstrated great intelligence in understanding and exercising his authority. Under his leadership, the epistolary communication of the Viceroyalty Secretariat functioned perfectly as a device that allowed the king to govern from a distance, draw the territories together, and significantly reduce uncertainty or breaches of good governance. Undoubtedly, the political and administrative legacy of the viceroys must

have influenced the formation of the Spanish American nations in some way, which also faced the need to govern vast territories.

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European and Ibero-American Academy
of Yuste Foundation

Translated by **Verónica Guillén Melo**