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# Letters and economic routes in the Spanish empire in the 18th century with GIS<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The postal service was one of the main channels through which letters, goods and actors circulated via fixed maritime and land routes, which favoured the circulation of postal communication between the most influential Spanish-American centres. This paper will examine the spatial organisation of maritime mail between Spain and America after the creation of the Maritime Post in 1764, as well as overland mail in the viceroyalty of New Granada, especially the Cartagena de Indias - Santa Fe de Bogotá route. It is based principally on the document *Reglamento Provisional del Correo Marítimo de España a sus Indias Occidentales* of 1764 for maritime mail. And the handwritten report of the commissioner José Antonio de Pando, which he produced around 1774. Both documents contain detailed information on postal routes, which have been reconstructed using a geographic information system (GIS). Through the use of GIS, a dynamic visualization of postal routes which made up the circulation of information, goods and agents in the 18th century is made possible.

## Postal system as vehicle for information and products in the overseas empires

During the *Ancien Régime*, the growth of epistolary culture went hand in hand with the process of bureaucratisation brought about by the emergence of the modern state and the burgeoning role of the written word and correspondence in the government structure and functioning (Chartier 2000; Bouza Álvarez 2006; Petrucci 2008). This was particularly the case in major empires, the rule of which involved the mass circulation of letters, documents, products and actors amongst different government bodies and social actors.

Concerning Spanish America, letters were the main vehicle for communication between authorities, bodies and private citizens on both sides of the Atlantic. From the outset, and throughout the colonial period, Spanish monarchs insisted on the need to maintain fluent epistolary links between Spain and the Indies. Private citizens also kept on top of their business and family matters mainly through letters. Colonial authorities used letters to send news and reports on a huge variety of matters, both official and private, and the metropolitan government bodies also sent their instructions by letter.

Correspondence was a governmental tool and a vehicle for political, economic, social and cultural communication; correspondence led to the consolidation of an epistolary society and, supported by an increase in literacy rates, the progressive bureaucratisation of the state, the growing use of pre-printed forms, the production and circulation of handbooks that explained the correct way to write letters, especially during the 18th century (Gómez 1733; Valbuena y Pérez 1791), as well as the emergence of a postal service that guaranteed the distribution of letters, money and goods.

The postal service was one of the main channels via which letters circulated. It eased communication and ensured that letters, the main way to convey information over a distance, were securely delivered. During the Early Modern Age, the postal service was a key cog in the administrative system: it was through this channel that information and instructions could circulate and was thus an important factor in decision-making processes for a wide variety of agents.

The postal service was a basic link between distant regions, and was, therefore, especially important for European empires with overseas possessions. In this context, the postal service was a basic tool for the political, economic, social and cultural administration of the differ-

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ent power spheres into which these colonial empires were divided. European states with colonies in America had to organise maritime, overland and fluvial routes to ensure that government orders were conveyed, ideas exchanged, family ties sustained, feelings and experiences shared, and business deals struck. In this sense, private letters played a primary role in the exchange of personal feelings (Otte 1988; Macías Domínguez and Morales Padrón 1991; and Sánchez Rubio and Testón Núñez 1999).

The 18th century resulted in interactions that stretched beyond Europe into a global exchange of ideas, goods and agents. The need to establish regular communication channels with their overseas possessions led the European Empires to reform their respective postal services and put them firmly under government control during the 18th century (Moreno Cabanillas 2017, 106–113). The main aim of these reforms was to implement measures to overcome the vast distances that inhibited the governments' ability to control events overseas; the governments depended on fast and reliable systems, as otherwise all correspondence became useless before its arrival, thereby undermining governability. Another of the main objectives was to make an economic profit from the overseas territories through the payment of postage for the mail (Moreno Cabanillas 2022).

All of the postal plans express the same ultimate goal of imposing a centralised system onto the territories. This centralised system was to be in line with broader political, economic and social reforms which aimed to consolidate the state's bureaucratic structure, and in which the post was to play a central role. However, each empire adapted these reforms to their own interests and local and regional circumstances, which undermined the political efforts to centralise the systems. Ultimately many of these reforms, far from leading to a linear and progressive increase in the centre's ability to control events, expanded the margins for autonomous action of local and regional authorities, largely because the vast distances involved inevitably meant that the governance of overseas possessions was always an indirect, incomplete, inefficient and slow business (Brendecke 2012, 30–38).

Postal services, therefore, became a complex network operated by multiple agents and communication systems and throughout the 18th century they became extraordinarily complex and far-reaching (Goril Brandtzaeg, Goring, and Watson 2018, 4).

During the 18th century, communication ran through a dense and complicated network of postal services. The postal reform undertaken by the Spanish monarchy led to an intense process of negotiation and adaptation, which tried to adapt the existing 'remote government' system to the global context of imperial competition. The Spanish postal reform was part of broader and more ambitious plans to rationalise the government of the colonies and to change the relationship of Spain with its overseas colonies by developing a new economic structure and enacting new imperial policies (Restall and Lane 2011).

The earliest post offices in Spanish America were established in 1765 in strategically sensitive spots for the Crown, such as harbours, economic centres and communication hubs. These offices were entrusted with directing the circulation of official correspondence; they became the direct link between the Spanish government and the interior of America, and thus the master pillars of the postal reform.

### The mobilisation of letters and goods in the Spanish America interior

The postal reform was a long-term project that included both maritime and overland distribution networks. The Bourbon Crown intended, in the long run, to take over the land mail, which, traditionally, had been in the hands of private agents, and thus gain full control over the colonial mail.

The complex administrative and judicial process that abolished the private handling of the mail in Peru, New Granada, and the other territories under the Galíndez de Carvajal family was the final chapter in the history of the *Correos Mayores* in the Spanish Monarchy. The trans-

fer was formally confirmed by two *Reales Cédulas*, issued on 13 and 16 October 1768. Two and a half centuries later, the Crown took the postal rudder in America back from the Carvajal family, opening the door to a new institutional model.

From that moment, the maritime and land mail was theoretically under the Crown's control. Now, it could freely legislate on all American issues while simultaneously collecting all of the revenue. In practice, however, this depended in large part on the local authorities, who sent numerous reports about the best way to organise the overland mail.<sup>1</sup>

The implementation of the postal reform faced many obstacles in America, and different strategies had to be mobilised to overcome them. From the start, the reform aimed to establish a governance model based on a good understanding of local conditions, and textual and graphic documents with suggestions about ways to improve postal flows proliferated.

From the beginning, plans were put forward to overcome the challenges posed by the circulation of the mail in the American interior, based on his thorough knowledge of conditions in the American continent.<sup>2</sup>

The Spanish Empire tried to organise the circulation of information in different scales, in order to integrate each territory into the imperial framework. An analysis of the spatial organisation of overland mail from Cartagena de Indias in Stangl (2020). Constant efforts were made to rationalise the routes, seeking the most convenient, safest, and shortest. On November 16, 1769, José Antonio Pando arrived in Cartagena de Indias with the mission to organise the mail in the viceroyalty, strategically distributing routes and post offices. Between 1769 and 1772, Pando sent reports about the state of post offices in America, including Cartagena de Indias's, which he reported to be in a lamentable state. Pando tried to improve the situation by appointing officials in several post offices, supervising the collection of postal fees, and both reorganising and creating postal routes, many of which were based on the roads built by viceroy Pizarro in 1750.

Based on his personal experience and the reports issued by his subordinates, Pando compiled a large volume of information, which he used to draft a series of instructions and regulations.<sup>3</sup> He even wrote regulations to deal with the mail in New Granada, based on those that were in force in the metropolis.<sup>4</sup> This culminated with a report entitled *Ytinerario Real de Correos del Nuevo Reyno de Granada y Tierra Firme*, published in the 1770s,<sup>5</sup> in which he made a list of postal officials, salaries, postal routes,

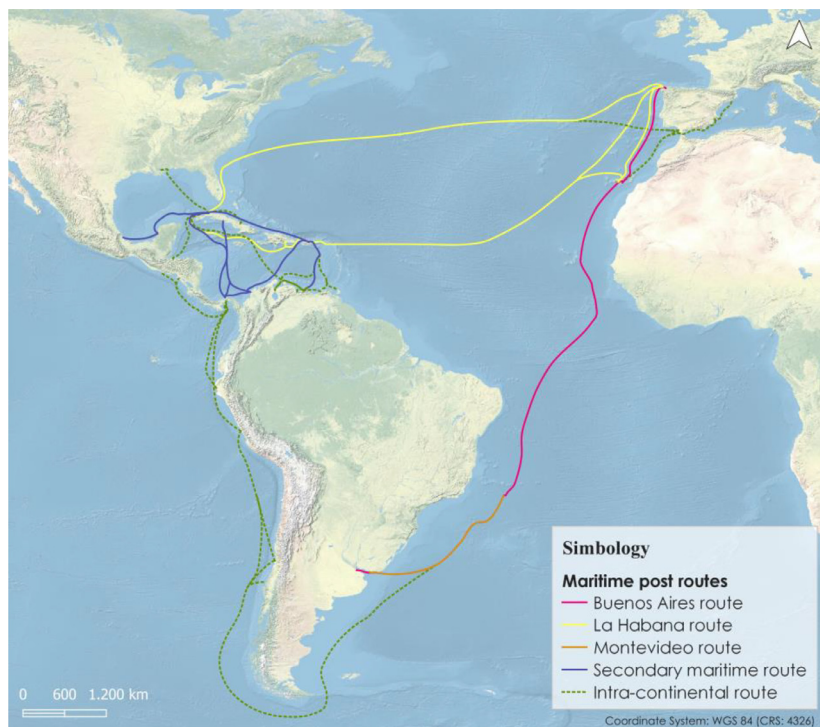
<sup>1</sup> Archivo General de la Nación de Colombia (AGNC), Colonial, Correos, Venezuela, tomo 1, documento 6.

<sup>2</sup> Antonio de Ulloa's plan, dated to 24 September 1765, proposed communicating Spain and Peru through a maritime route running through Portobelo. Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Correos, 217-A.

<sup>3</sup> The most outstanding of these works are *Las instrucciones y reglas generales sacadas de las ordenanzas de la renta de correos que provisionalmente se comunican por el comisionado y visitador general de ella a los Administradores de las Estafetas de este Nuevo Reino de Granada, agregadas a la Administración principal de la ciudad de Cartagena de Indias, y los de las demás provincias de Tierra Firme; para la mejor recaudación de sus productos; advertencias particulares que deben observar dichos administradores y los oficiales interventores para la remisión de encomiendas por el correo, cuyo ramo se halla incorporado a dicha renta; y método que han de llevar en el mando de sus respectivos oficios de cuenta de la Real Hacienda*. AGI, Correos, 484-A, and *Instrucciones o apuntes particulares del método que se debe observar en el cargamento y descarga de embarcaciones de la renta de correos, destinadas a la conducción de la correspondencia desde el puerto de Trinidad de Cuba a este de Cartagena y Portobelo*. AGI, Correos, 69-B.

<sup>4</sup> AGI, Correos, 69-B

<sup>5</sup> No agreement exists about the publication date. Roger Pita Pico dates it to 1770, because it was endorsed by Viceroy Pedro Mesía de la Cerda in August 1770; Werner Stangl argue that, although undated, the report was likely written around 1774, because the description of the road from Maracaibo to Caracas mentions a letter dated to 5 February 1774. See Pita Pico 2016, 225 and Stangl 2020, 206.



Map 1: Map of sea routes. Source: map created by Ana Castillo Jurado with data from Werner Stangl (ed.), *HGIS de las Indias* (Project FWF, P 26,379-G18, 2015–2019). Available online: [www.hgis-indias.net](http://www.hgis-indias.net).

departure and delivery days, and fees.<sup>6</sup> The work can be regarded as a topographic document, in which the distances of the extensive postal network are carefully annotated and put in relation to places, detailed itineraries and travelling distances. The representation of space in the documents drafted by postal administrators is in line with Sylvia Sellers-García's work on the spatiotemporal conception of space in Guatemala from the perspective of the postal system (Sellers-García 2013). In any case, Pando was aware that the road to a good postal system was long and would be filled with difficulties: "I agree you're your highness that not everything can be addressed at once, and that we shall have to be industrious and patient so that little by little things can be put right".<sup>7</sup>

### Postal routes in the viceroyalty of Nueva Granada

The mail was carried by fixed maritime and land routes, which favoured the circulation of postal communication between the most influential Spanish-American centres.

The official postal itinerary began in the port of La Coruña, the city from which a monthly packet-boat was dispatched to transport mail, goods and passengers from the Peninsula to America. The packet-boat went to Havana, but first it stopped in Santiago de Cuba, Trinidad or Puerto Rico, where the correspondence from the south of America was loaded onto a ship belonging to the postal revenue that had to be available to set sail for Cartagena de Indias. This journey from La Coruña to Cartagena de Indias, with a stopover in Cuba or Trinidad, took about 45 days. After about ten days, the mail revenue ship would leave for Havana, taking about 20 days, from where it would set sail back to Spain with the mail from America, a journey that would take about 52 days.<sup>8</sup>

In Spanish America, correspondence was distributed and circulated throughout the Spanish American territory by means of multiple land and river roads, paths and trails. The postal itineraries had departure

and arrival centres selected according to their geostrategic importance for the political and economic powers, with the intention of integrating different areas of the American interior around the articulation of imperial networks. The postal routes were modified over time, as the postal system grew and with it, routes were added or altered. These postal systems played a key role in the configuration of the territories.

The book *Ytinerario Real de Correos del Nuevo Reyno de Granada y Tierra Firme*, written by José Antonio Pando, represents the temporal and spatial coverage of the Nueva Granada itineraries that connected the different communication nodes through which the mails travelled regularly. The so-called Pando Manuscript is a reference work to know the Nueva Granada postal system, in which the postal routes of the viceroyalty of Nueva Granada around 1770 are described exhaustively with details of the roads and their obstacles, the post offices and their postmasters, the postal rates, regulations and provisions, and detailed population of the viceroyalty.<sup>9</sup>

The postal routes passed through each postal district where they had their post office, where they received and dispatched the correspondence of their territory. The main postal administrations were located in major cities, from where the mail was redistributed for their demarcation along roads, rivers, paths and tracks. The post offices became the central hubs around which the postal routes were articulated. If there was any correspondence addressed to a place where the postal network did not reach, it had to be deposited in the post office nearest to its destination.

The postal drivers were those in charge with moving the mail. These overland mail drivers made their routes on horseback or on foot, depending on the geographical characteristics of the territory. These

source for the study of jurisdictions and *corregimientos* in the viceroyalty. See Herrera Ángel 2001.

<sup>7</sup> AGI, Correos, 69-A.

<sup>8</sup> This information is developed in the logbooks corresponding to the *Carrera de La Habana* and can be found at AGI, Correos, 269 A –276B.

<sup>9</sup> The document of José Antonio Pando, together with other reports of the postmasters of Cartagena de Indias from the General Archive of the Indies and the General Archive of the Nation of Colombia, constitute the sources used to trace the careers of the post office that existed after the postal reform.

<sup>6</sup> *Ytinerario Real de Correos del Nuevo Reyno de Granada y Tierra Firme: El Manuscrito de Pando*, Biblioteca "Eduardo Santos" de la Academia Colombiana de la Historia, Bogotá – Colombia, 1770. The abundance of geographical data about New Granada conveyed by the work has turned the *Ytinerario* into a prime

drivers were able to transport mail and goods through a paid licence specifically for the transport of mail and goods provided by the post office. In the case of small villages, where there was no established post office and therefore could not obtain a licence from the post office, the agents could despatch mail and goods without a licence to the nearest place where there was a post office, where the licence would be issued, and they could then continue their journey.

There was the participation of many blacks and mixed-raced individuals in the distribution of the mail, especially down the Magdalena River,<sup>10</sup> alongside aboriginal couriers, known as *chasquis*,<sup>11</sup> who knew the ground particularly well (González Martínez 2017, and Quesada 2017). “*Chasqui*” was an indigenous term that came to designate any courier, regardless of ethnicity, until the opening years of the 19th century. The use of the term indicates the strategy deployed by the postal system to integrate the locals, especially as *chasquis*, who played a crucial role in the distribution of the mail in New Granada, most notably in the interior regions.

### Connecting two centers of information and economy with GIS: Cartagena de Indias and Santa Fe

The main route of the viceroyalty was that of Nueva Granada because it was the postal route between the two most important cities in the area.

On the one hand, Cartagena de Indias was the main transatlantic harbour, the hinge between Nueva Granada and the Caribbean and the rest of Spanish America, Spain and other overseas empires. The port and its bay were strategically located, and the city was one of the main Spanish bases in America from the earliest Spanish efforts to colonise the continent. Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa’s *Noticias Secretas de América* claimed that ‘Cartagena de Indias possesses one of the best bays on all the coasts that have been discovered to date’ (Juan and Ulloa 1826, 3–6). As such, Cartagena de Indias soon became one of the most important harbours worldwide, one of the gates to interior America, a key axis of communication and a hub of trans-imperial interaction (Meléndez 2020).

The post office in Cartagena de Indias was created in February 1765 (Moreno Cabanillas 2022). This office was meant to centralise the administration of the post in the region and become a central hub for the imperial postal network.<sup>12</sup> Owing to its strategic location and its role as communication node, this office remained one of the most important post offices in the whole of Spanish America, ruling over a host of secondary offices that channelled the post through the interior of the viceroyalty of Nueva Granada. The number of secondary offices increased over time to give shape to the postal structure and the territorial hierarchy that the Crown wished to implement.

On the other hand, Santa Fe de Bogotá, capital of the viceroyalty of New Granada, from its first establishment in the decree of 21 October 1718,<sup>13</sup> and in 1739 when the viceroyalty was definitively re-established through the Royal Decree of 20 August promulgated by Philip V (Conde Calderón 1995: 5). The postal administration of Santa Fe was created in 1765 as a subaltern of that of Cartagena de Indias until it was consolidated as a main post office from 1771.

This route connected the five most important points of communication in the viceroyalty of Nueva Granada, where different information distribution circuits converged: Cartagena de Indias, main port of

transatlantic connection with New Granada, with the Caribbean area, with other American regions, with Spain and with other overseas powers; Santa Fe de Bogotá, the main administrative and political centre of the viceroyalty of Nueva Granada, which served as a point of confluence between different parts of the region;<sup>14</sup> Popayan, an important centre of mining production and connection with the viceroyalty of Peru (Díaz López 1994); Mompox, important economic centre of Nueva Granada, a link in the connections between Santa Fe and Cartagena, a hub for both the legal and the illegal traffic of goods and passengers as well as the exchange of correspondence, and also serving as a centre for shipbuilding and crew supply (Peñas Galindo 1998); and Honda, the administrative centre regulating river trade in Nueva Granada.

The postal route from Santa Fe to Cartagena began in the capital of the viceroyalty, through the plains until it reached Facatativá. From Facatativá, the route followed slippery and very muddy mountain roads through narrow paths in these hills to the village of Guaduas. It followed a hilly road through which it had to cross the Guaduas River, which, not having a bridge, caused the journey to come to a stop in rainy weather. After crossing the river, it followed a high mountain road with narrow and very dangerous uphill and downhill paths until it reached the village of Honda. Once in Honda, a boat had to be taken to travel along the Magdalena River. This river was an essential waterway for the transport of mail and goods between Santa Fe and Cartagena de Indias.

During the river journey, the postal system passed through some towns such as Puerto Nare, San Bartolomé, Simití, Tamalameque until it reached Mompox, where it continued along the river, passing through towns and villages such as Tenerife, to the port of Barranca del Rey, the port where the mail boats arrived. From Barranca del Rey the postal system travelled overland through Mahates, Arjona and Turbaco to their final destination, Cartagena de Indias, along a very muddy flat road with streams, reed beds and very thick and abundant wild trees. According to the regulations, the postal system made this journey from Santa Fe to Cartagena twice a month, dispatching from Santa Fe on the 1st and 15th of each month, taking between 17 and 28 days, during which time the replies had to be verified between one side and the other, including the detentions in each place.

Map 2 shows the main route (track) of postal communication connecting the main administrations located in Santa Fe de Bogotá and Cartagena de Indias. It also shows the stops along the route in the so-called secondary administrations, which are dependent on the main ones. If we look at this map, the route is marked by two ways of travelling, the first by land, represented by a continuous line, and the second by river, in a broken line. Several elements have helped us to establish the possible path of the route. The journey that begins in the capital of the viceroyalty and travels by land to Honda is defined according to the route of the Camino Real. A large part of this road still exists, so it has been digitised taking into account a current orthophoto and the representation of this road on the OpenStreetMap base map.

In the case of the inland waterway route, it has been drawn along the current course of the Magdalena River as far as Puerto Barranca del Rey. From this secondary point, the route returns by land to the final destination, Cartagena. This route has been traced taking into consideration the “Plano y descripción de la costa y Provincia de Cartagena de Yndias [...]” of 1729 (Pérez 1729) since, besides representing the coast and the Magdalena River, it also shows settlements and several main roads, and amongst them is the one that links Cartagena with Barranca del Rey, passing through other secondary administrations such as Turbaco and Mahates, and other settlements that still exist today and that have also been taken as a reference.

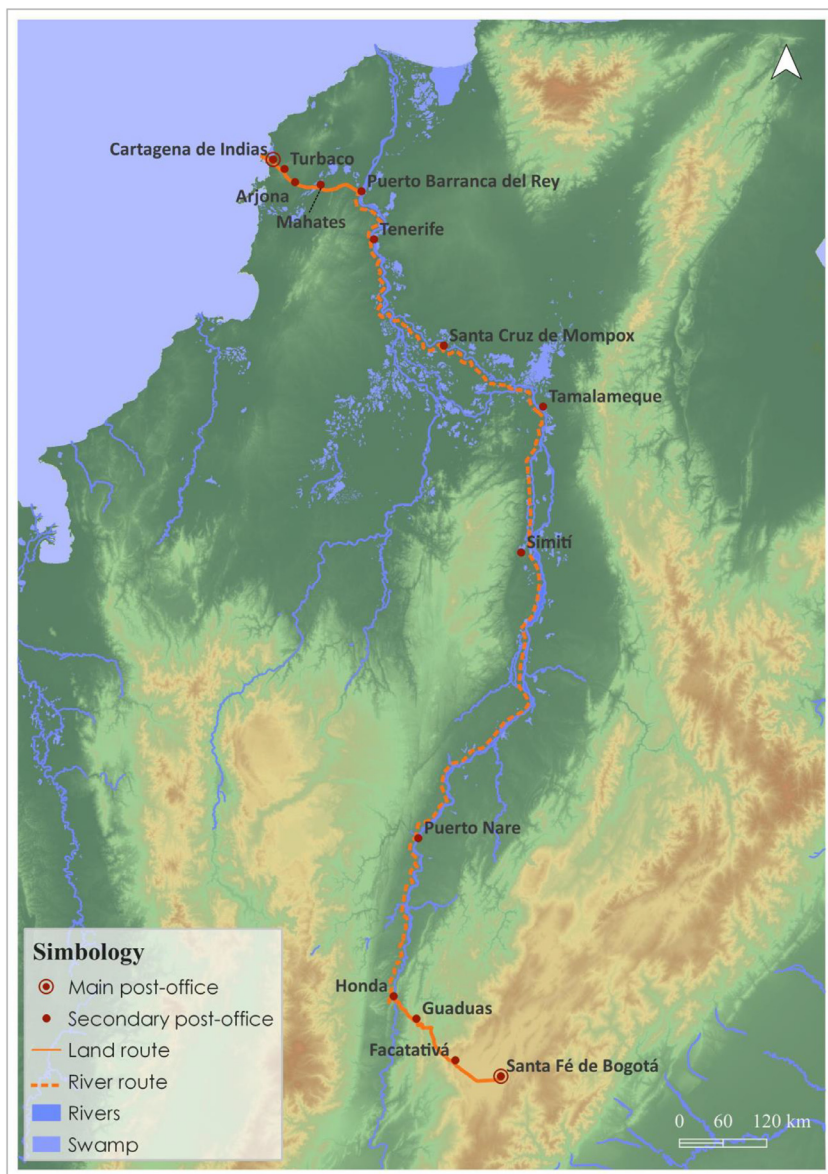
<sup>14</sup> The Audience of Santa Fe was created by Royal Decree of 17 July 1549: “la ciudad de Santa Fe de Bogotá debería residir una audiencia y chancillería real con un presidente, gobernador y capitán general, cinco oidores, que fuesen también alcaldes del crimen; un fiscal, un alguacil mayor, un teniente de gran chanciller y los demás ministros y oficiales necesarios” (Restrepo Canal 1949: 8).

<sup>10</sup> AGI, Correos, 69-A.

<sup>11</sup> The *chasquis* were, generally indigenous, men that carried the mail on foot. The name made reference to the messengers who carried out similar functions during the Inca period. At that time, *chasquis* “had marks or posts next to the road to guide them. As they approached the relay point, they shouted or blew a trumpet for the next runner to get ready and meet them on the road”. See Gutiérrez Álvarez 1993, 322.

<sup>12</sup> AGI, Correos, 69 A.

<sup>13</sup> AGI, Audiencia de Santa Fe, 542, n. 263



Map 2: Land mail Cartagena de Indias – Santa Fe de Bogotá. Source: Map generated using data from Archivo General de Indias by Ana Castillo Jurado.

Map 2 has been made with historical GIS (Geographic Information Systems). It reflects vector plotters and distances and proximities. This methodology allows complex historical narratives to be visualized, in this case, postal routes in the viceroyalty of Nueva Granada, formed by the interrelation of various data bases with different contents put in relation to geographic space. As a result of this union, it is possible to visualize a map of information about postal itineraries collected in a data base (Baudot Monroy 2015). The postal communication is well-suited to GIS because it makes extensive use of cartographic sources that can be effectively modelled and analysed within a GIS environment (Gregory, DeBats, and Lafreniere 2018, 527). Additionally, in the specific case of colonial mail in Spanish America, the work of Stangl (2020) and Araneda Riquelme (2014 and 2020), are important. The latter focuses on spatial issues and the construction of itineraries, where a series of GIS-generated maps highlight the data from a postal office (Araneda Riquelme 2014 and 2020).

This research follows the line of the spatial history that integrates knowledge of the humanistic ties that create the network with our evidence of the network's spatial dimensions (Gregory, DeBats, and Lafreniere 2018, 3). Historiography has revealed various possibilities and weaknesses in the historical application of geographic information systems. Richard White says that spatial history is a mean of doing re-

search, “it generates questions that might otherwise go unasked, it reveals historical relations that might otherwise go unnoticed, and it undermines, or substantiates, stories upon which we build our own versions of the past” (White 2020, 6). Many authors discuss how maps, spatial data and GIS are changing historical scholarship (Moretti, 1997, Bodenhamer's 2008, Bol's 2012, Carrion 2016, Goodchild's 2018).

## Conclusions

This paper is based the information from the correspondence, regulations and files from European and American archives, mainly Archivo General de Indias and Archivo General de la Nación de Colombia in order to create an information data base on postal service in the viceroyalty of Nueva Granada in the 18th century. This article is based on the collection of information, organisation of databases, use of geospatial attributes and construction of maps from primary sources and analysis of secondary literature.

This research methodologically proposes the use of technological tools such as GIS in order to represent the past in a different way in line with spatial history. The use of the GIS has visually represented communication practices, noting how the political use of the com-

munication practices, observing how the political use of the post office allowed the integration of different spaces with different routes. The maps reflect the maritime and overland mail routes, that is, the mobility of correspondence from a different methodological point of view. The geographical-historical representation reveals the circulation of correspondence, agents and products in Spanish America in the 18th century. It demonstrates the cooperation between the commercial and postal dimensions of the Bourbon reforms is interesting for understanding the dynamics of communication towards in the early modern history.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper

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