THE CASTLE AT BURGOS:

A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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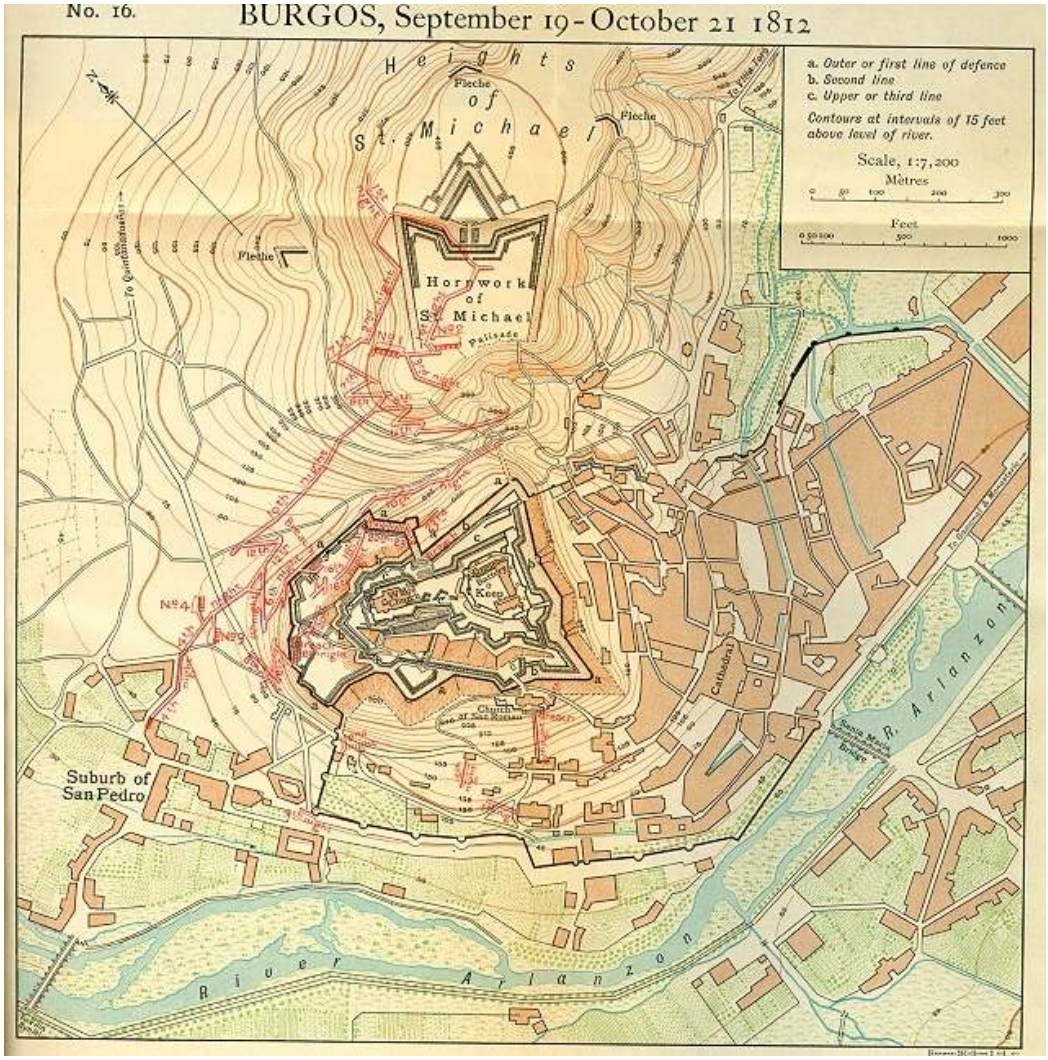
The Castle at Burgos

Preamble

In the autumn of 1812 the citadel which the French forces of occupation had constructed around the mediaeval castle that dominates the city of Burgos was besieged by the forces of Lord Wellington. The result, however, was failure – the only significant failure in his military career. Poorly provided with artillery, the Anglo-Portuguese forces were unable to breach the walls effectively, while the defenders exhibited great skill and courage and repelled repeated assaults. After one month, then, the siege had to be abandoned. Anglo-Portuguese casualties amounted to more than 2,000 men, and the result was the evacuation of a large part of the territory that had been liberated by Wellington following the battle of Salamanca, the terrible retreat to Ciudad Rodrigo (which cost Wellington another 5,000 dead, wounded and missing) and a major crisis in Anglo–Spanish relations. As such, the siege of Burgos represents a key moment in the history of the Peninsular War, or, to give it its Spanish title, the Spanish War of Independence. In the context of the bi-centenary of the events of 1808-1814, it is therefore an event that is certainly worth commemorating, and all the more so as Burgos possesses resources that give it unique advantages in this respect.

Chronology of the Siege of Burgos, September-October 1812:

19 September: Anglo-Portuguese army surrounds Burgos; during the night the hornwork of San Miguel is stormed with the loss of 421 killed and wounded.
25 September: detachments of British troops from First Division supported by Portuguese *caçadores* from Sixth Division attempt to escalade outer wall but are repulsed with loss of 187 casualties.
26 September: mining operations commence against two points of outer wall.
29 September: first mine brings down section of outer wall, but an assault is repulsed with the loss of twenty-one killed and wounded.
4 October: second mine blows major breach in outer wall; both breaches are assaulted and a lodgement established inside the outer wall.
5 October: French sally causes heavy losses among troops holding first breach.
7 October: heavy autumn rains set in and continue for the duration of the siege.
8 October: second French sally again causes heavy casualties.
10 October: mining operations commence against second line of defences and church of San Román; British artillery posted on Cerro de San Miguel open fire on northern front of defences of Cerro del Castillo, and eventually breach the ramparts.
17 October: mine slightly damages second line of defences.
18 October: mine badly damages church of San Román which is then stormed by Spanish and Portuguese troops; British and German troops assault the breaches in the second line of defence but are repulsed with heavy casualties.
19 October: French sally temporarily regains control of church of San Román.
21 October: Anglo-Portuguese army raises the siege and evacuates Burgos; total Allied casualties amount to 409 dead and 1,555 wounded or missing.



The Site and its Context

The fortress at Burgos was constructed between January 1809 and the summer of 1812 in accordance with plans that were drawn up by Napoleon after he passed through the city in November 1808. In brief, the mediaeval castle – a mere shell that had been devastated by a serious fire in the 1750s – was surrounded by a triple line of bastioned ramparts of which the first was partly built on the basis of a mediaeval wall that ran around the lower part of the conical hill on which the castle stands and the second and third constructed by scarping (i.e. terracing) its upper reaches. In addition, a powerful casemated battery was built atop the castle itself, and the ramparts protected with a variety of palisades and other obstacles. The whole complex, which embraces both the Cerro de Castillo and the adjoining Cerro de San Miguel, measured perhaps one mile from north to south and half a mile from east to west. Although the castle itself was blown up by the French when they finally evacuated the city in 1813, this has now been restored, while the fortifications that surrounded it have survived almost entirely untouched due to the fact that the area in which they are contained is now a country park. The ramparts may therefore be traced in detail (and remain impressive even now – they are in many places between six and eight metres high and are often extremely

complex in nature), while it is also possible to observe some of the siege trenches and batteries constructed by Wellington's forces. The *pièce de résistance*, however, is the three breaches that were blown in the external walls of the Cerro del Castillo. Accompanied as they are by various works that were improvised by the French to protect them against assault, these are beyond doubt the best examples of such features to be found in either Spain or Portugal, while it may be that they are also without parallel anywhere else in Europe: as breaches were, for obvious reasons, generally filled in after a siege had come to an end, they only very rarely survive as features of the physical landscape. At the same time, meanwhile, as features that are especially dramatic in themselves, they serve as graphic reminders of the horrors regularly braved by soldiers in the Napoleonic era.

The fortress of Burgos, then, is clearly an important historical site in its own right. The defensive complex, however, is important in another sense as well. In the course of the French occupation, Napoleon's forces often found themselves to be very thinly stretched, while many of the larger towns and cities that they held were in any case militarily indefensible. In a large number of places, then, citadels were constructed as military headquarters and places of refuge, the fortifications at Burgos providing a very good example of just such a position. Often the focal points of these citadels were convenient castles or monasteries, but on occasion defences had to be constructed *ab initio* on convenient areas of high ground. Whatever the form that these places took, however, almost none of them survive. The forts at Madrid, Salamanca and Seville have all vanished without trace, for example, whilst only fragmentary remains are to be seen at Granada and Tudela. In consequence, Burgos is vital as practically the only example of an intact French citadel.

One last issue to be considered is access and current use. As previously mentioned, the area in which the citadel stands is entirely contained within a forest park, and it is heavily wooded throughout. It is, then, a very pleasant amenity for the city of Burgos, especially as it is only ten minutes' walk from the city centre, and has been further embellished by the provision of a parking area, a bar, a restaurant, a children's play area, a fitness trail, benches, picnic tables and an extensive network of footpaths.

Development within the site has otherwise been limited, the only exception being the northern portion of the site where the construction of a covered reservoir and associated buildings on the Cerro de San Miguel in the late nineteenth century slightly encroached on one corner of the defences (two minor roads traverse the site but these do not appear to be much used except by access traffic). Meanwhile, the castle itself has been restored and cleared of the rubble left by the explosion of 1813: there are plenty of information boards within it and an interesting museum (albeit one lacking in any reference to the siege) and it is now possible to walk round much of the outer circuit of the defences, these providing striking views both of the city itself and of the surrounding countryside). Finally, away from the castle itself there are also traces of the mediaeval Jewish cemetery that once occupied part of the site and, possibly at least, the remains of Iron-Age fortifications, these adding a further dimension of historical interest (it should be noted here that the hill occupied by the castle was the site of the original city: this was abandoned in favour of the present valley site in the thirteenth century).

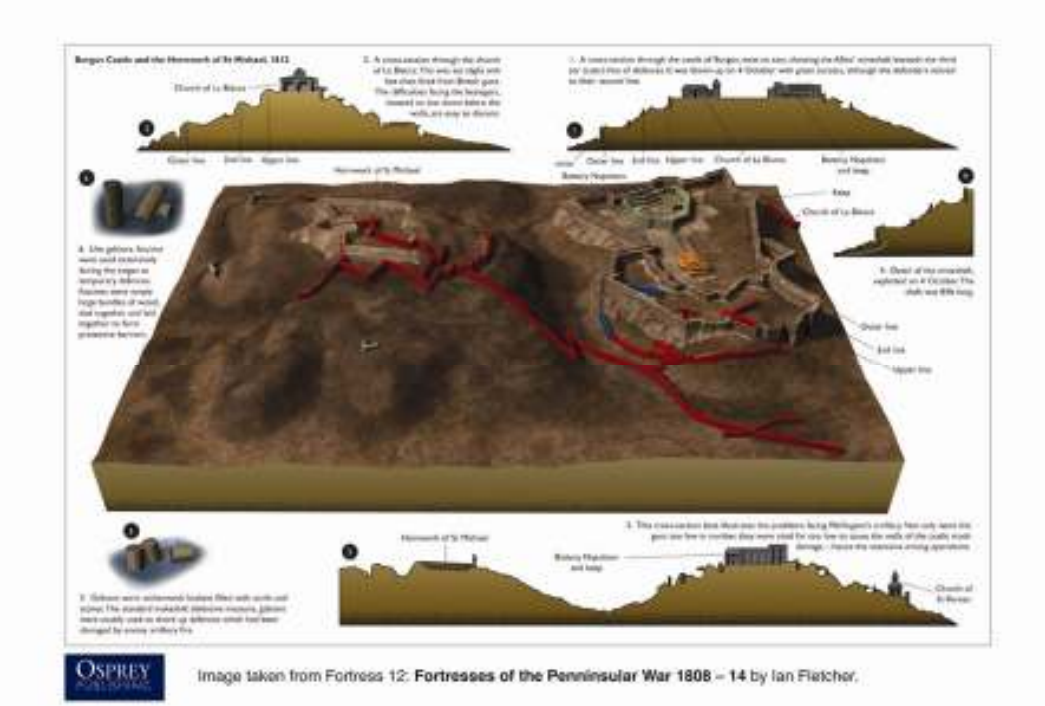


Image taken from Fortress 12: **Fortresses of the Penninsular War 1808 – 14** by Ian Fletcher.

Note 1 top right: A cross-section through the Castle of Burgos, west to east, showing the Allies' mineshaft beneath the third (or outer) line of defences. It was blown up on 4 October with great success, although the defenders retired to their second line.

Note 2 top left: A cross-section through the church of La Blanca. This was set alight with hot shot, fired from British guns. The difficulties facing the beseigers, situated so low down below the walls, are easy to discern.

Note 3 bottom right: This cross-section best illustrates the problems facing Wellington's artillery. Not only were the guns too few in number, they were sited far too low to cause the walls of the castle much damage – hence the extensive mining operations.

Note 4 middle right: Detail of the mineshaft, exploded on 4 October. The shaft was 83 ft. long.

Note 5 bottom left: Gabions were wickerwork baskets filled with earth and stones. The standard makeshift defensive measure, gabions were usually used to shore up defences which had been damaged by enemy artillery fire.

Note 6 middle left: Like gabions, fascines were used extensively during the sieges as temporary defences. Fascines were simply large bundles of wood, tied together and laid together to form protective barriers.

See also: http://peninsularwar200.org/Burgos Castle.pdf

It is notable, however, that despite the riches which the site offers, little attempt has been made to realise its potential beyond the development of the castle itself. There is almost no reference to the siege on the site itself and, beyond a small nineteenth-century obelisk whose inscription is completely indecipherable, no monument to the fighting. Moreover, conversations with local inhabitants suggest that there is knowledge neither of the citadel, nor of the siege. To a considerable extent, it would appear that this ignorance is connected with the wooded nature of the site (in the Napoleonic era bare hillsides only), for in most areas of the defences the tree cover is so thick that it is impossible make to them out for what they are.

Archaeological Evidence

Before proceeding to a detailed description of the site, it is worth summarising such archaeological exploration as has been carried out to date. Setting aside the many attempts made during the nineteenth and (early) twentieth centuries to find the treasure reputedly left buried in the castle by the French forces when they evacuated Burgos, archaeological exploration of the site began in the mid-1990s with the decision to refurbish the castle hill – hitherto an extremely marginalised area with a bad reputation for drugs and prostitution – for leisure purposes. In brief, prior to the construction of the visitor area immediately to the west of the castle, work had to be carried out to ensure that the area disturbed did not affect the foundations of a large mediaeval basilica (Santa María la Blanca) that had once stood upon the site (it will be noted here that the focus of interest was not the siege or the French defences), and in the process a number of remains were found that dated from the Napoleonic era (musket balls, cannon shot, shell fragments, buckles, coins, etc.). There followed a gap of some fifteen years, but in 2008 the need to shore up portions of the western exterior walls led to further work by the city's archaeology department. This work turned up some extremely important finds of a nature in the form of five complete skeletons of victims of the fighting, at least one of whom was a British soldier (so identifiable by his buttons). These were in a good state of preservation and in some instances showed clear signs of trauma injuries; together with all the other material discovered on the site, they are now housed in the city's museum (though in no case on show to the public). Taking the finds of the two excavations together, whilst further work is clearly necessary, sufficient material has been uncovered to support further development of the site (for example, through the provision of exhibits for display purposes) as well as on occasion to challenge established accounts of the siege. A further point to note here, meanwhile, is that there are tell-tale signs that metal detectorists have begun to operate in parts of the site: it is important, then, that further scientific work is carried out in the near future. At the same time an apparent ignorance of the importance and extent of the site has led to unfortunate lapses in its protection: in February 2009, for example, the author of this report discovered human remains in the form of various fragments of bone scattered on the surface of the ground in the interior of the hornwork of San Miguel: these had been disturbed in the course of work that was currently in progress to erect a mobile phone mast.

Visible Remains

1. *The Castle*

As noted above, the castle was blown up after its evacuation by the French in June 1813. The explosion reduced it to ruins and for many years the site was left untouched: when visited by the author of this report in 1984, the walls were rarely more than two metres high, while the courtyard was filled with a mass of rubble. Since then, however, a considerable amount of restoration work has been carried out – in places, indeed, the walls now approach their original height (see Figure 1), but no effort has been made to reconstruct any features of the castle that were specific to the Napoleonic era, the only aspect of the site in this respect being the well that was the defenders' chief source of water during the siege. Thanks to the possibility of walking the walls, however, it is easy to appreciate the dominant position of the castle: to the east, south and south-west in particular the views are extensive.

2. *Cerro del Castillo*

As noted above again, the castle was only the focal point of a much more extensive system of fortifications that encompassed the whole of the steep-sided hill on which it stands. In essence, these consisted of three main lines of defence, viz., first, an inner ring of bastioned earthern ramparts surrounding the castle and the basilica of Santa María la Blanca (destroyed along with the castle in 1813); second, a similar line of ramparts that were partially faced with stone and positioned 50-100 metres further down the hill; and, on the western half of the site only, the wall of the original city of Burgos (finally abandoned apart from Santa María la Blanca in the thirteenth century, this occupied much of the Cerro del Castillo); each of these lines, meanwhile, was palisaded and, at least in the case of the inner two, 'fraised' with projecting stakes (see Figures 3-6). Despite frequent mention in contemporary British accounts of both ditches and counter-scarps, such features appear to have been entirely absent, however. Although here and there interrupted by modern building work of various sorts, e.g. the Carretera del Castillo (the modern access road that ascends the hill from the vicinity of the cathedral) and the erstwhile Seminario de San Jerónimo (now in part converted into a hotel), the ramparts have in general survived and stand out as steep-sided terraces running across the hillside; these frequently still attain a height of 5-6 metres, while in those sectors that were faced by masonry - this last now almost all gone other than for a line of broken rubble at the foot of the defences – they are positively precipitous. Also visible, meanwhile, are considerable sections of the mediaeval wall that constituted the outermost line of defence on the southwestern, western and northwestern flanks of the hill (note that the wall ended abruptly at the small turret that may be observed close to the entrance to the ravine separating the Cerro del Castillo from the Cerro de San Miguel; from here the line turned sharply inwards in a re-entrant before somewhat inexplicably curving round in the form of a raised earthern wall no more than two metres toward the second line of defences which it finally joined immediately below the castle (it would have made far more sense to follow the natural line of the terrain, and it may therefore be the case that this sector of the defences had to be hastily improvised as the Anglo-Portuguese army closed in). In places, in part due to damage suffered during the siege (see below), all traces of masonry have now disappeared, as has the ditch which is believed to have protected the wall, but throughout its length the line of the wall is easy to trace as a steep bank rising from the Calle Francisco Salinas (commencing at the gate of San Martín) and continuing along the aptly named Calle de Murallas, the height again being as much as six metres. A final point to note here, meanwhile, is the nature of the terrain between the first and second line of defence. Above the Calle de Murallas this consists of a broad terrace that is now occupied by a disused football field – the product, it seems, of the scarping that produced the cliff-like front of the second line in this sector – but above the Calle Francisco Salinas the ground rises very steeply from the line of the mediaeval wall and is in part traversed by a series of terraces reminiscent of an Iron-Age hill fort (see Figure 2). As the site of the castle was occupied in the Celtiberian period, it is possible that these terraces are part of such a complex (for an example from a neighbouring province, cf. the hill-fort near Cervera de Río Alhama in Logroño), but it also possible that they were constructed by the French in an attempt to strengthen what was perceived as a weak point in the defences.

3. *Cerro de San Miguel*

Separated from the Cerro de Castillo by a deep ravine that is now followed by the Camino de las Corazas, the Cerro de San Miguel - the only position from which the defences of the

castle could be bombarded with any ease - was protected by a separate complex of fortifications of which the centre-piece is the so-called 'hornwork' (a contemporary technical term for a detached redoubt positioned in advance of a more substantial defensive position). Constructed on a north-south axis, this consisted of two bastions connected by a recessed curtain wall pierced by a postern gate that was in turn protected by a projecting v-shaped ravelin, the space between the two bastions and the ravelin forming a deep ditch that is now followed by the northern extension of the Carretera del Castillo (see Figures 11-13). To the front, meanwhile, the whole complex was shielded by an artificial glacis. All this meant that the northern face of the hornwork was the most regularly constructed section of the entire fortress, but there was a major weak point in that the work was never finished. Initially the plan had been to extend the side walls of each bastion southwards to the crest of the slope overlooking the ravine and then block the gap between the two with a further wall, but the Anglo-Portuguese army arrived before this work could be carried out, and the hornwork therefore in the end occupied only about half the area planned for it, all that the French had time to do being to close the rear face of the work with a strong palisade (by contrast, time constraints meant that neither the front nor the two flanks received any protection of this sort).

Today this part of the fortifications is particularly well preserved. Part of the eastern face has been lost due to the construction of a large tank-style reservoir in the late nineteenth century, but, though heavily cloaked by trees, the two bastions, the curtain wall, the ravelin, the glacis and the western face all survive more-or-less in their original condition (the walls of the bastions and curtains, for example, rise to a height of 5-6 metres). Confusingly, however, the complex seen today is considerably larger than that which faced Wellington: at some point after the siege - indeed, possibly even after the Peninsular War - the eastern and western faces were extended back to the line originally planned for them and the gap between the two closed by a new wall.

Beyond the hornwork the French constructed three small redoubts as advanced posts. Designed to prevent enemy troops from using areas of dead ground to launch a surprise attack, these were simple curving banks of earth with no form of flank or rear defence. Two of them appear to have completely disappeared, but the northernmost one can be still traced (it stands at the northern crest of the Cerro de San Miguel some 200 metres beyond the wildlife centre that has been built in the centre of the hornwork's glacis, and is particularly interesting for the manner in which it incorporates a prominent knoll into its perimeter; see Figure 14).

4. *Remains of the siege*

Thanks to the largely undeveloped nature of the site, both the Cerro del Castillo and the Cerro de San Miguel are rich in traces of the siege of September-October 1812. Taking the two positions in the order in which they became involved in the fighting, just below the southern crest of the Cerro de San Miguel it is possible to see traces of the fire trenches that were constructed by the Anglo-Portuguese forces in an attempt to protect the two batteries that they dug in/beside the hornwork after its capture on the first night of the siege; unfortunately, however, no trace is visible either of the batteries or the communication trench that was dug to connect the Allied positions on the Cerro de San Miguel with those facing the western and north-western slopes of the Cerro del Castillo in the vicinity of the suburb of San Pedro. With respect to the Cerro del Castillo, the situation is much more promising. Nor was this

surprising, for it was here that Wellington concentrated the bulk of his operations. In brief, the initial plan was to break through the old city wall and then assault the French second line. To achieve this objective, after various other plans had failed two mines were dug under the walls and then blown up. Of these the first, which was constructed near the junction of the Calle de las Murallas and the Calle del Boforno, was too short and therefore made little impact on the topography, though its site may be clearly observed. However, the second was a much more significant affair. Constructed near the junction of the Calle de las Murallas and the Calle Francisco Salinas and packed with a far more substantial charge, this blasted a significant gap in the defences. Stormed by British troops on 4 October, the two breaches together gave Wellington a foothold within the first line of defences and several trenches were begun inside the walls to allow a start to be made on approaching the second line of defences. The line of these may be followed at various points, but they are particularly visible beyond the northern extremity of the old city wall where an approach was constructed in the lee of the rampart constructed by the French mentioned above to allow suppressive musket fire to be directed at the sector of the defences that had been elected as the next point of attack (see Figures 7 and 10). In brief, this last was on the northern face of the Cerro del Castillo at a re-entrant angle in the defences where the French first line ran back to unite with the second. Bombarded from the two batteries on the Cerro de San Miguel, this point was quickly breached and then assaulted on 18 October. Accessible by a footpath, this breach is extremely well-preserved, so much so, indeed, that it is probably the best example of such a feature in the whole of Continental Europe, whilst its interest is increased by the fact that clear traces may be seen of the various improvised defence works thrown up by the French to reinforce the sector against assault (see Figure 8). Such works, meanwhile, may also be observed in the southern sector of the defences of the Cerro de San Miguel: here the defenders threw up a detached work known as a cavalier to enfilade the trenches dug by Wellington's troops in the wake of the assault of 4 October and protect the approaches to the gate that connected the middle and outer baileys of the fortress (see Figure 9).

5. *Environs*

In general, beyond the fortified area delineated above, urban growth has ensured that there are few reminders of the siege. That said, however, a number of points of interest are worth noting. Roughly parallel to the Calle de las Murallas, for example, runs the Calle de las Mesnadas. Far below the level of the defences, in 1812 this was a sunken lane that was used by Wellington's troops as a jump-off point for their attacks on the mediaeval wall. An extremely steep flight of stairs links the street with the Calle de las Murallas via the Calle del Boforno: this provides a graphic reminder of the difficulties faced by the Allies in mounting assaults of any kind on this front (see Figure 15). A further point of interest, meanwhile, may be found at the junction of the Carretera del Castillo with the Calle de San Estebán. Here two small pieces of mediaeval stonework protruding from the retaining wall at the foot of the Cerro del Castillo are all that is left of the church of San Román: held by the French as a defensive outpost, this was captured by Portuguese and Spanish troops during the assault of 18 October after being severely damaged by a third mine.

Conclusions

The French fortress at Burgos, then, is one of the most impressive Napoleonic sites in Spain. In an excellent state of preservation, it exhibits various different styles of fortification and is

particularly noteworthy for the fashion in which the occupants made use of earlier structures to reinforce their defences. If this is interesting enough, however, the most striking feature of the site is the traces that it offers of actual siege operations: either because they have fallen victim to urban development and/or restoration work, or because the victors of sieges invariably filled in such features as trenches and breaches, these are something rarely seen elsewhere.

Charles J. Esdaile, 30 September 2009

Photographic Appendix

Fig. 1: Castillo de Burgos (eastern face)

Fig. 2: Cerro del Castillo - terracing between French first and second lines of defence.

Fig. 3: Cerro del Castillo - third line of defence

Fig. 4: Cerro de Castillo - second line of defence (faced with masonry in 1812); the cave is the result of damage caused by the mine exploded on 17 October.

Fig. 5: Cerro del Castillo - remains of the first line of defence fronting Calle de las Murallas at the spot assaulted by British troops on 25 September 1812.

Fig. 6: Cerro del Castillo - mediaeval turret flanking first line of defence in Calle de Las Murallas; enfilade fire from this position cost the besiegers many Casualties until it was silenced by artillery fire.

Fig. 7: Cerro de San Miguel - British assault trench dug within first line of defences.

Fig. 8: Cerro de San Miguel - lip of third breach showing parapet thrown up by defenders.

Fig. 9: Cerro de San Miguel - detached work thrown up by French to flank second breach.

Fig. 10: Cerro del Castillo - British assault trench dug from second breach.

Fig. 11: Cerro de San Miguel - western rampart of hornwork.

Fig. 12: Cerro de San Miguel: sally-port in north face of hornwork.

Fig. 13: Cerro de San Miguel: ravelin protecting north face of hornwork.

Fig. 14: Cerro de San Miguel - central *fleche*.

Fig. 15: Modern stairs leading from Calle de las Mesnadas to Calle del Boforno following the route taken by the unsuccessful escalade of 25 September.