

Charles J. Esdaile and Philip Freeman, *Burgos in the Peninsular War, 1808–1814: Occupation, Siege, Aftermath*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2015; xiv + 221 pp., 10 illus.; 9781137432896, £63.00 (hbk)

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The 1812 campaign had started well for Wellington and his Anglo-Portuguese army. Forcing the border fortresses, the allies entered Spain and, after beating the main French field army at Salamanca, took Madrid on August 12. Wellington's next move was to march northward against the grouping of enemy forces under General Clausel. There, about halfway towards the French frontier, stood the city of Burgos, the historical capital of Castile. The month-long siege that followed, in which a garrison of 2000 French troops successfully defied Wellington's army of over 30,000 is reasonably well known, although it has not been given much prominence. Dominating Britain's political and military life for almost forty years after the war, the duke was known to disdain open criticism of his actions. This compelled a whole generation of memoirists and early historians to convey their observations in a very careful manner. Subsequent scholarship of the Peninsular War often took at face value their accounts, which emphasize the lack of resources, failings of individual regiments, errors by engineers and artillery officers and lack of cooperation by the Spanish allies. In other words, Anglophone historians were essentially reproducing the explanations provided by Wellington for his failure to take Burgos. Prompted by the rediscovery of the original siege works and closely supported by thorough rereading, often between the lines, of all

known contemporary sources, Esdaile and Freeman are aiming to set the record straight.

As suggested by its title, this volume does more than provide an account of the siege. It traces Burgos' transformation from a prosperous medieval city to an impoverished provincial town well before the French occupation. Burgos' experience during the Peninsular War was exacerbated by its position on a major road from the Pyrenees to Madrid. It was one of the first cities taken by the French. A failed attempt to resist Napoleon's advance in November 1808 led to another capture and a sack. The emperor ordered Burgos' medieval castle to be strengthened and it was the local population which was compelled to provide the funds and the workforce. Burgos was not unique when it was forced to maintain a French garrison and string of embezzling governors, but its inhabitants also had to supply large bodies of French troops which regularly passed through the city on their way to the south. More generally, Burgos' destitute condition and its Gothic cathedral came to play 'a substantial role in what may be termed the cultural history of the Peninsular War. Thus, the first substantial place that most French troops involved in the struggle came to, it confirmed their darkest suspicions: in brief, Spain was not just poor and backward, but literally mediaeval' (29).

Coming to the events of 1812, the authors suggest that when Wellington left Madrid he was still unresolved whether or not to attack Burgos, initially preferring to unite with the Spanish Sixth Army. This delay allowed Clausel to avoid battle, while Wellington found himself in front of a strong fortress with inadequate resources. Actually, it is stunning how badly the allies were prepared for the siege operations. Wellington's army had only five heavy guns and three mortars and fewer than 3,000 rounds of ammunition. Unable to bombard the fortress into submission and fearing the repetition of what happened at Badajoz, where the successful storm cost thousands of casualties, Wellington drew up plans calling for a number of mid-sized assault parties to strike in unison under the covering fire of their comrades in the trenches. These plans called for far greater coordination and precision than could be reasonably expected, and storming parties often arrived at the walls unsupported and too weak to succeed against the alert defenders. Faced with a growing threat to his communications by French forces converging against Madrid, Wellington was compelled to lift the siege on October 21. By the end of the November the allies were back in Portugal, having endured a further 5,000 casualties during a grim winter retreat, adding to the 2,000 men already lost in Burgos.

Esdaile's and Freeman's analysis of the siege and campaign is engagingly written, rich in detail and offers many new insights. The survival *in situ* of the physical remnants of the fighting, including siege trenches, breaches blown in the outer fortifications and retrenchments put up by the French defenders, greatly improve our understanding of what actually happened and why. What prevents the book from becoming a superb introduction to conflict archaeology is the complete lack of photographs and the low resolution of the map reproductions, which are reduced to a fraction of their original size. This is even less acceptable when one

considers the hefty price of this slim volume. Despite the inconvenience, one is also advised to read very carefully through the small font of the appendices and the lengthy footnotes. Astonishingly, it turns out that Wellington had access to a detailed French plan of Burgos' fortifications, captured in Madrid, if not earlier (155). This strongly reflects on the wisdom of marching against it without an adequate siege train. But even when the army arrived at the fortress and the strength of its defences became apparent, it would still have been possible to arrange for heavy guns to be brought from the recently captured French artillery park in Madrid or from Santander, which had just been taken by the Royal Navy. Summons were eventually sent to the latter – nearly two weeks after Burgos was invested and too late for the cannons to reach the fortress before the siege was abandoned (177 n11 and 183 n4). Integrating these important points into the main body of the text would have even more effectively conveyed the main argument of the authors concerning who was responsible for the allied failure at Burgos: 'the chief blame lies with Wellington, and this, not so much because he undertook a siege with inadequate means, as because he failed to take prompt action to remedy the situation' (124).