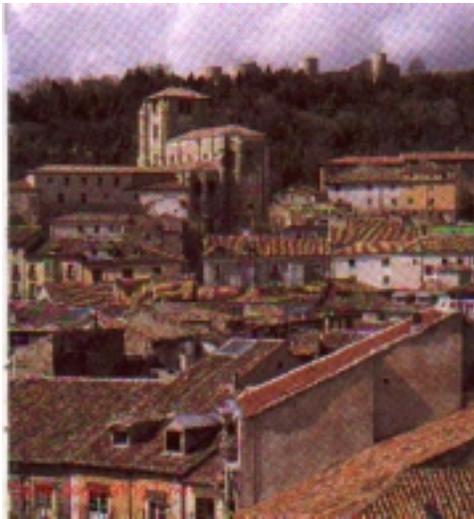


## The Napoleon Series

### Burgos Then and Now: the Siege of 1812

By Gareth Glover



Castle of Burgos from old town

#### BURGOS IN 1812

**B**urgos lies on the main highway from France to Valladolid, at a point where the road south to Madrid forks off. It has, therefore, always been strategically important. Napoleon recognized this during the conduct of his operations in Spain. It's ancient castle commanded the bridges (many histories mention only one bridge, but there were certainly two in 1812) over the River Arlanzon. The French had made it into a main depot and commenced a number of improvements to the fortifications, but as the war moved away to the South, few were completed.

The works were based on an old keep which stood on a steep conical hill. It had been burnt out some 75 years previously, but the shell remained strong and had been strengthened by French engineers, allowing them to mount a

battery (Napoleon's battery) upon it. Forty yards behind was the church of La Blanca, linked to the battery by a covered way. The church was only good for a storehouse. The whole was surrounded by a 30-foot-wide ditch which formed the first line of defences. Old medieval walls formed a second line with ditches cut in front. On the west side, a third line of defences were raised, on the other sides the hill was too steep to allow a further line of defence. To the north east, a separate hill some 250 yards away of the same height was crowned by a hornwork. This hill was commanded by the Napoleon battery.

The garrison of two thousand men under the governor, Brigade General Dubreton had no cover within the fortress, most having to bivouac against the inner face of the walls.

Burgos could only be classed as safe against Spanish insurgents but weak against an army with a siege train.

Burgos was invested by the British 1st and 6th divisions on 19 September 1812, but Wellington only had three 18 pdrs and five 24 pdr howitzers, and very limited ammunition!

The siege of Burgos was Wellington's greatest failure, it became a protracted exercise in trench digging and mining, but despite brave attempts to storm the castle, it proved too strong.

It failed for a number of reasons, the main ones being, a lack of means, both guns and ammunition; a lack of specialists, both engineers and sappers; the Portuguese did not relish siege work; small detachments were used to avoid heavy casualties, but led to initial success being thwarted for lack of reserves; officers often became too embroiled in the action, were wounded or killed and confusion arose; even Wellington cannot escape censure for underestimating the resources needed to win.

On the 20 October the siege was raised as the French main army closed. The British army snuck away at night, having to cross the bridges in range of the castle's cannon. It was achieved without loss by muffling the wheels with straw. British casualties were approximately 2000, the French lost 623.

A year later, the British army approached again, but the French inexplicably declined to be besieged again. Two massive explosions destroyed the castle with the loss of four hundred men as the mines went off prematurely. If the castle had held, Wellington may not have been able to proceed on to his victory at Vitoria.

*Reference: Myatt, Frederick, British Sieges of the Peninsular War*

## **BURGOS TODAY**

Burgos has since grown into a large city; however, the old city of 1812 is still recognisable centred around the cathedral. The city gate and main bridge are still there as is the second bridge, a little further downstream, but obviously has a more modern structure above its ancient base. The castle hill still dominates the skyline here, but the castle is now mere ruins with little vestige of its past left to see. The towers that are still standing appear to be modern reconstructions, as the Spanish authorities are carrying out works here. The steep approaches to the castle, its commanding view over the city, and its bridges can still be appreciated. The hill with the hornwork is now heavily wooded with little evidence of its previous defences.



**Santa Maria bridge and gateway  
(new bridge on ancient foundations)**

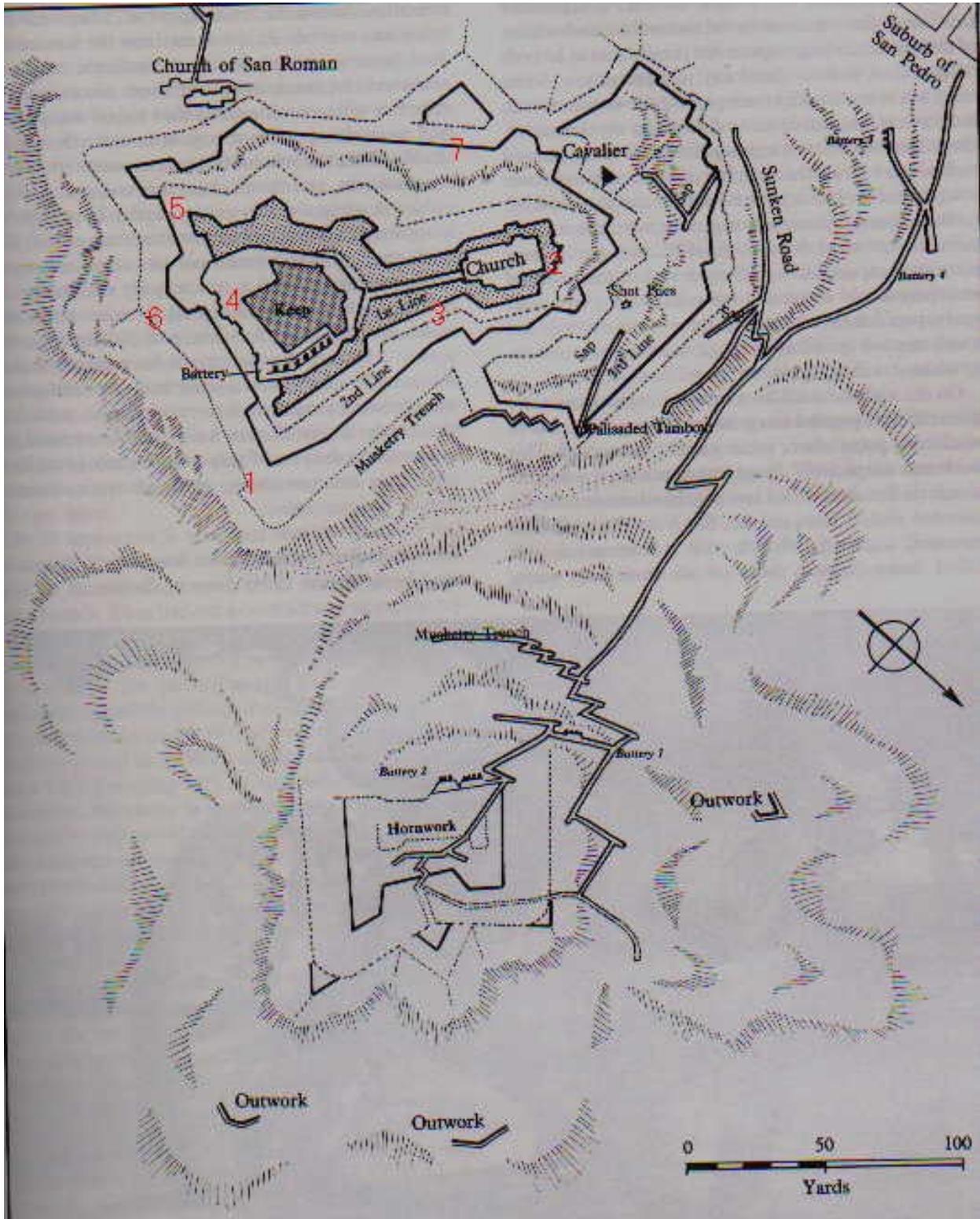


**View of second (less well known bridge)  
over Arlanzon**



**Medieval gateway to Burgos,  
the army retired through this  
arch in the dead of night.**

Map of Burgos Castle. The numbers annotated in red on this map correspond to photographs 1 through 7 on pages 4 and 5 of this article.





1. Medieval wall at base of hill, facing hornwork



2. Part of the first line (inner wall) near La Blanca church



3. Sally port in inner wall facing hornwork



4. Foundations and remnants of walls in ancient keep



5. Remains of keep from within



6. The keep from outside



**7. View of walls facing south-west and entrance arch on western face**

Editor's Note: this article first appeared on John Schneider's Napoleonic Literature website around 2000. It is published here with his permission.

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