

## The cemetery of General Thiebault

Right in front of me I have a 12-page essay written by a friend of mine, actually, he's a friend of one of my past pupils who knows I have a crush on Burgos and its people. The title looks plain enough but somehow has an eerie ring to it: El cementerio del General Thiebault. Something like A cemetery built by General Thiebault.

Why am I bringing it on air? Because it is intimately related to Burgos, as this French army general had this cemetery built somewhere in our city.

Spain had been occupied by the French troops led by Napoleon. Culturally, a secular wind was picking up speed and strength throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. General Thiebault, by way of experiment, and to win more favour with his superiors, commissioned the construction of a cemetery outside the church's grounds. That was meant to signal a new era characterised by the marked separation of earthly matters and the supernatural ones. In case such measure were to be viewed as groundless he sought to prompt a much more favourable response by bringing into the debate public health concerns.

Some deadly plagues broke out with high death tolls. This put pressure on local authorities for burial space and advanced the cause of non-parish graveyards. However, there were many who protested against the construction of graveyards outside churches. They raised several objections. They claimed that such move would hit underfunded churches financially and it would dent believers' religious fervour.

The French troops set foot in Burgos in October, 1807. Spain will rapidly become a satellite country with puppet rulers. After a succession of various governors, General Thiebault arrives in Burgos early in February, 1809.

Since day one he showed great concern with urban development and public health issues. He took it upon himself to undertake a meticulous cleaning up of the entire city. Probably he did not blame it on the occupying forces. It was in this context that the whole idea of banning burials inside churches' grounds sprung to the general's mind. He was, as he himself describes it in his published *Memoirs*, attending Mass at the Cathedral. He wasn't particularly pious, rather he was after some peace of mind that would allow him to give municipal matters proper consideration.

This nauseating stench coming from improvised coffins reached him and he went sick. He thought that a drastic measure was in order and within days he signed a by-law under which the archbishop and the priests under him should make sure that no soul be buried inside or within a church's grounds from then on. Instead, the new burial site will be the grove orchard opposite Saint Augustine's convent.

The location, a rectangular plot of land sitting between one of the walls surrounding the abandoned convent and the Hospital de la Concepción, seemed to serve the general's purposes just fine. It was at some distance from the town but not offputtingly far. Thiebault had the site inspected by a team of physicians who would have to give their approval as to its sanitation standards.

But the general could not have anticipated that the first challenge to his ban would come shortly after its coming into effect. One of the senior priests within the Cathedral's chapter died. The Archbishop, who had a chip on his shoulder about the general, asked formally for his permission to have an exception to the burial ban as he wanted the high-ranking clergyman to be buried inside the Cathedral.

Undoubtedly, it was a real challenge which, if given in to, would have set a bad example and would have undermined Thiebault's authority. On the other hand, if he did not accommodate the Archbishop's demand the general would have fueled the clergy's already intense animosity.

General Thiebault eventually went the diplomatic way and had it his way. Paradoxically, he managed to convince the priests in the chapter that it was surely a sign from Heaven above that such a senior clergyman could become the first "guest" at the new cemetery, as that was a way in which God gave his blessings to the site.

Despite more deaths among those Cathedral officials, all of them of natural causes, no more controversies erupted. The truth is that slowly but gradually, more and more Burgaleses grew discontented about the stench coming from the newly-built graveyard, and the fact that human remains were beginning to be visible from a distance at the burial site.

The cemetery went on being used, almost uneventfully, until the French left. At that time, banned burial procedures resumed and Thiebault's plan was put aside.

Mind you, just as well as that cemetery would have just got in the way of recent urban development moves in San Agustín area.

## **Gold Bracelet in Atapuerca**

Over in the Atapuerca digging site they have struck gold. Wait, don't rush off with picks and shovels. It's not that kind of gold. We have just learned that back in 2004 researchers came across a solid gold bracelet which had not lost its glitter despite the roughly 3.000 years it is supposed to have been sitting there. So it dates back to the Bronze Age.

I can imagine the faces of those paleontologists who despite unflinching perseverance in their research work...

in sometimes very tough circumstances. We tend to picture these palaeontologists as bookworms staring at books and manuscripts for hours on end.

Oh no, no. They do a lot of fieldwork and crawl and crouch and bang their heads against low ceiling inside caves, all covered in mud.

One of those lucky people to encounter the relic was Ana Isabel Ortega, a member of Edelweiss,.

Our listeners probably now that Edelweiss is a renowned association of speleologists based in Burgos which has been particularly active in the mapping and cataloguing of the caves in the Atapuerca area. Back in 1962, it was members of the GEE who reported the existence of fossils in the Trinchera del Ferrocarril.

She has a terribly gripping and though-provoking article published in the January issue of National Geographic. In it she claims that the bracelet should be linked to some ancient burial ceremonies and rituals. Therefore the place it was found in must have been one of a sacred nature.

It strikes me as extraordinary when I read her thoughts. She keeps saying with a somewhat mysterious tone to it that this discovery should prompt us to reconsider the role of these underground caves for those ancient cave men. It is almost as if that darkness and silence made those places particularly fit for spiritual nourishment and worship.

Ok, anyway good for those working at the Atapuerca dig.

## **Register for council housing applicants**

Our listeners must remember that back in November, 2006 a brand new register for applicants for social housing was set up by La Junta de Castilla y Leon. Now we have learned that those would-be beneficiaries putting their names down in Burgos average 25 a day, which makes the total figure by January 4 come to 611 applications. I wonder what we can make of this figure...

Surely it reflects the pressing need for affordable housing as more and more first-time buyers are discouraged by offputtingly high housing prices on the open market.

What changes does this register bring with it?

Registration has been made mandatory for any applicant to qualify and it will be used by the regional housing department to make sure that applicants meet all requirements and to dispel any suspicions about fraudulent or dubious awarding of flats.

So they want to send the message out that the scheme will be characterised by absolute transparency and fairness. The register will also serve a very practical purpose, that is, gauging the real demand for council housing, so that the housing department can adjust its supply to it.

I know some people who frown on these affordable housing schemes. They claim, probably rightly, that some successful applicants are only after sizeable returns on the selling of the council flat within two or three years...

They have put in some term restrictions that hopefully will prevent this from happening, although some awardees are explicitly exempted. For example large families who need to sell because they need much more space due to new members being born.

And those who qualify for these scheme are the usual ones: large families, single-parent households, undertwenty-year-olds, oversixty-year-olds, disabled people .. although a new category has been included, that of immigrants who might be at risk of social exclusion.

## **The vote on the school timetable**

The controversy rages on and is managing to divide all those somehow involved in education in the city into opposing sides. The time has come again for 14 schools to have a vote, decisive one. The issue being decided? Whether these 14 state primary schools will join others in shifting from a split school day with a long lunch break to a non-stop school timetable that finishes at 2 in the afternoon.

Judging by statement made it seems that passions are running high. Many have engaged in a blame game as if nobody was confident in how persuasive their arguments may sound.

I have been following this story for quite some time and I'm still baffled. Some teachers and school Principals have claimed, quite outrageously and unconvincingly, that the split school day breeds boredom and aggressiveness. I wonder if those claims are based on reliably scientific grounds.

But on the other end of the spectrum you have parents voicing vitriolic arguments against school staffs claiming that this demand for change is triggered by teachers wanting to have their individual work schedules shrunk.

Personally, I would like to see more unbiased and less judgemental rationale being produced by professionals rather than pseudo experts. I was pleasantly surprised when I read some views coming from a parents' association FAPA, Asociaciones de Padres de Alumnos de Centros Públicos de Burgos. They tentatively admit to school staffs and parents using as overriding considerations their own convenience when structuring their working hours.

Probably the most puzzling argument that I have found is that advocating compressing the school timetable in to the morning time so that parents can spend more time with their kids while boasting guaranteed extra-curricular time between 4 and 6 o'clock.