

## The Divisional System in the British Army, 1808-1815

The late Eighteenth Century had seen a growing trend in military organisation towards the formation of semi-permanent divisional organisations for infantry and cavalry. Previously, brigades generally composed of around two to six infantry battalions or cavalry regiments had been assigned to ad-hoc “wings”, “lines”, or “columns” depending on the requirements of the ongoing campaign or anticipated battle. Such a system precluded the development of any staff functions below the central army level, be those functions either logistical or command-and-control, and, whilst suited to the generally more formalised warfare of the early and mid Eighteenth Century, the more flexible tactics of the American and French Revolutionary Wars indicated the need for a more solid subordinate organisation. French commanders and theorists as early as the 1760s had argued for the adoption of a divisional system in which a single senior commander would assume control on a more concrete basis of two to four brigades of infantry along with supporting artillery and sometimes cavalry and by the early nineteenth century this had become a common practice in all European armies.<sup>1</sup> For Britain, fighting short, small scale campaigns, this organisation had not become established to the same degree, but the seven years of the Peninsular war saw the British army fighting its first sustained European campaign since Marlborough’s day, and the Peninsular Army under Wellington would eventually see the successful evolution of a practical divisional system which would not only serve as part of the key to success on the battlefield, but also play a role second only to that of regimental identity in creating the *esprit de corps* for which this army is justly remembered. Subsequent campaigns in Northern Europe and, to a lesser extent, North America, saw attempts to recreate an army on the Peninsular model, and the doctrinal inheritance of the system would continue down the years, but what I would like to largely address here, is the less obvious aspects of the new system, regarding the creation of an

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<sup>1</sup> See in particular Steven T. Ross, “The Development of the Combat Division in Eighteenth-Century French Armies”, *French Historical Studies* Vol.4 No.1 (Spring, 1965), pp.84-94; also Martin Boycott-Brown, *The Road to Rivoli. Napoleon’s First Campaign* (London, 2001), pp.47-61.

unusual sense of loyalty to, and identification with, a level of the military hierarchy that, in most wars and most armies, would never have received such a status.

To place this in context, it is first necessary to have some overview of how the system created by Wellington worked. The first eighteen months of the Peninsular war had seen the British forces in a very fluid state of organisation, as command passed from Wellington, then still merely Sir Arthur Wellesley, to Sir Hew Dalrymple and then, after the recall of the latter, to Sir John Moore. Each of these men organised their forces in different ways, none of which organisations lasted any great time, and the bulk of the troops were in any case evacuated back to Britain in January 1809 following Moore's retreat to Corunna. Command of the rump of the forces left to hold Portugal passed, in April 1809, back to Wellesley, and it was from this beginning that the army that ultimately fought through to Toulouse in 1814 grew. Although there was a considerable doctrinal inheritance for divisional organisation of forces existing by this time, a shortage of senior officers forced Wellesley to fight the initial campaign in northern Portugal with an army lacking any permanent organisation higher than that of the brigade, although these brigades were provisionally grouped under those senior men who were available. In the aftermath of the campaign there was a move to make this level of organisation more permanent for the subsequent campaign that would culminate in the Battle of Talavera and, creating the first four of an eventual nine permanent divisions. These Divisions, as permanent entities, were ultimately assigned officers from the Quartermaster-General's, Adjutant-General's, Commissary General's, Provost Marshal's and Medical departments, responsible to both their divisional and departmental chiefs and therefore streamlining the administrative functions of the army. They were also each assigned an artillery battery, later in some cases increased to two. The practice of incorporating Portuguese battalions into the brigades, which had been tried in the Oporto campaign, was abandoned, and the entire forces of that nation were to remain at home to complete their

training during the course of the next campaign, being formed into a corps of observation under William Beresford, the British officer seconded to command the Portuguese Army. Henceforth, with a handful of exceptions, Portuguese units formed their own brigades, and were integrated into the command structure as such.<sup>2</sup>

After the strategic failure of the Talavera campaign, with more British regiments joining the field army, and with the Portuguese now fit to take their place in the line, the course of 1810 saw a continual reorganisation and shuffling of brigades to create the nine infantry divisions – First through Seventh, Light and Portuguese – that would endure until the end of the war. As of February 22<sup>nd</sup> Robert Craufurd's Brigade of light infantry was removed from the Third Division, of which Craufurd had been holding temporary command, and used as the nucleus for the new Light Division which was completed by the assignment of two Portuguese Caçadore battalions.<sup>3</sup> Craufurd's command was much smaller than the others – five battalions and a troop of Royal Horse Artillery – but it concentrated the pick of the army's light infantry and rifles into an elite formation whose initial role was that of watching the frontier whilst the rest of the army completed its reorganisation for the defence of Portugal. Later, they became the army's shock troops but, particularly after Craufurd was killed at Ciudad Rodrigo in January 1812, their quality became somewhat diminished as additional battalions lacking the status of the original quintet were assigned.<sup>4</sup> However, with a reputation for dash and daring that spawned a considerable crop of memoirs in later years, the Light Division held themselves in continued high esteem, a point which will be addressed in more detail later.

Since this took the Third Division down to two-and-a-half battalions, Lightburne's Brigade was moved across from the Fourth Division, and the Third and Fourth Divisions then

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<sup>2</sup> Sir Charles Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War* (Seven Vols. Oxford, 1902-1930), Vol.II, pp.435-438.

<sup>3</sup> Sir Charles Oman, *Wellington's Army* (London, 1912), p.349.

<sup>4</sup> By 1814 there were five British and four Portuguese battalions, two of the latter being line troops. The Brunswick-Oels Regiment and the 2/52nd also served briefly under Craufurd. See Oman, *Wellington's Army*, pp.349-373.

each received a brigade of Portuguese infantry to maintain them at a strength equivalent to the First and Second Divisions which remained all-British, at least for the time being. Two more Portuguese brigades were combined to form the army's only all-Portuguese division, although this was under a British officer, British Major General John Hamilton. This unwillingness to entrust senior commands to Portuguese officers would continue throughout the war – only Carlos Le Cor and Francisco Silveira would obtain divisional commands in the field army, and only the former would command British troops, during his brief tenure at the head of the Seventh Division in 1813.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, by spring 1811, the basic divisional structure was complete, with seven numbered divisions of the line, plus the Light and Portuguese Divisions. These formations contained only infantry and artillery; cavalry organisation was also by division, of which there were two for a time and then a single large one, but the composition of these commands was far more fluid and the brigade remained the main command unit in the mounted arm. The numbered divisions of line infantry, being the basic building blocks of the army as a whole, were each based on the model of two brigades of British troops and one of foreigners; the latter being either German and émigré troops in British service, or Portuguese, although there were anomalies existing at times. Although new Divisions were formed in 1810 and 1811 as additional troops came out as reinforcements, one of the key features of the system as implemented by Wellington meant that the new arrivals were for the main part integrated into existing formations rather than used to create entirely new units: the only Division formed entirely 'from scratch' was the Seventh.<sup>6</sup> This mixing of new and experienced troops was one of the secrets of Wellington's success, and was continued throughout the war.

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<sup>5</sup> Ron McGuigan, "Wellington's Generals" in Rory Muir, Robert Burnham, Howie Muir and Ron McGuigan, *Inside Wellington's Peninsular Army 1808-1814* (Barnsley, 2006), pp.194, 196; see also João Centeno, "General Officers in the Portuguese Army", *The Napoleon Series* ([www.napoleon-series.org](http://www.napoleon-series.org)), viewed May 30<sup>th</sup> 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Oman, *Wellington's Army*, pp.170-171, 357-358.

In terms of command, many of the men leading these formations were fairly junior, a circumstance forced by Wellington's own fairly low seniority in the army list. The long term effect of this bar on senior officers was to advance the careers of younger, more junior, commanders who found themselves serving in posts more usually filled by more senior men. A small number of more senior officers did come out early on, but illness and wounds cut short the careers of most, and by the time the divisional system was complete in mid-1811 all divisional commanders, with the exception of Sir Brent Spencer, commander of the First Division and nominal second-in-command of the field army, had risen from brigade-level commands held either in the Peninsula or in the 1809 Walcheren Expedition.<sup>7</sup> The problem was that although the level of choice of subordinates enjoyed by Wellington increased in proportion with the standing he gained as a result of his victories, he never had complete choice over his subordinates.<sup>8</sup> He was thus forced to find employment for men such as the mentally unsound Sir William Erskine, who was given temporary commands of the Light and Fifth Divisions before taking the Second Cavalry Division in what would seem to have been an attempt to place him where he could do the least harm, and who eventually put himself out of everyone's misery by throwing himself from a window; or the ambitious but militarily inept Christopher Tilson, who changed his name to Chowne in an attempt to boost his social standing but had to be eased out of command of the Second Division under Hill in 1812 due to incompetence.<sup>9</sup> There was nevertheless still some scope for flexibility, such that, for example, Craufurd could command the Light Division as a junior Brigadier General whilst officers a whole rank higher, the sorry Tilson mentioned above for one, languished at brigade-level. The policy of giving competent brigadiers acting divisional commands when there was a temporary vacancy also created a pool of men who could step up to a more permanent

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<sup>7</sup> The process is tracked in McGuigan, "Wellington's Generals", in Muir et al. *Inside Wellington's Peninsular Army*, pp.172-200.

<sup>8</sup> McGuigan, "Wellington's Generals", in Muir et al. *Inside Wellington's Peninsular Army*, pp.176-179.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Glover, *Wellington as Military Commander* (London, 1968), pp.197-200 (Tilson), 87-89, 194, 214-215 (Erskine).

command when required in the future: By the end of the Peninsular War there were several, notably Charles Colville, Edward Pakenham, and Denis Pack, who had held such acting commands for a worthwhile time, and, indeed, Colville got a division permanently when the army was re-formed for Waterloo and Pakenham an equivalent command in the American War.<sup>10</sup> Earlier in the war, Alexander Campbell, having been tested in a temporary appointment to lead the Fourth Division, was later given permanent command of the Sixth.

Whilst the organisational benefits of the divisional system helped to contribute towards the Army's string of successes in the Peninsula, they were also second only to regimental identity in their contribution to its morale and self-image. It is significant in this vein that all eventually came to acquire nicknames, most of which were complimentary. The First Division, with the Footguards forming a key element, was the "Gentlemen's Sons"; the Second, so often detached in the south and therefore missing most of the battles of 1811-1812, was the "Observing Division" and the Fourth, which assisted it so ably at Albuera when likewise detached, was the "Supporting Division", although thereafter its spontaneous advance in that battle earned it the title of "Enthusiastics." The Third Division, commanded after Mackenzie fell at Talavera by the quintessential fighting general Sir Thomas Picton, and in the thick of just about all the major battles from then through to Toulouse, was the "Fighting Division": Just as Picton and Robert Craufurd were great rivals, so too were their troops, and the Light Division, resenting the implied snub in the Third's nickname all the more after it allegedly failed to support them during the 1810 fighting on the Coa, simply called themselves "*The* Division" and treated their counterparts of the line with appropriate disdain. Hard work and little glory in the early years of the war saw the Fifth Division labelled the "Pioneers" and the Sixth the "Marching Division", and these names stuck even after both formations distinguished themselves in the thick of the fighting at Salamanca.

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<sup>10</sup> For their tenures as divisional commanders in the Peninsula, see Oman, *Wellington's Army*, pp.355-372.

Cavalry officer William Tomkinson noted in his diary, having recounted the above nicknames, the rather sneering remark then current that, “We have *heard* there is a Seventh Division, but we have never *seen* it”, whilst others called the Seventh the “Mongrels” in reference to its many foreign battalions.<sup>11</sup> The former comment probably stemmed from the fact that, after heavy losses at Fuentes de Onoro in 1811, the Seventh was kept out of serious action until 1813, whilst the latter may have been simple national chauvinism, of a similar nature to that which stigmatised “Dutch” formations in the Union army of the American Civil War.<sup>12</sup> Indeed the Seventh, whose fighting record was generally good, came to take something of a perverse pride in their casting as the army’s misfits. George Wood of the 1/82nd Foot, whose battalion was posted to the Seventh Division in the reorganisation of spring 1813, wrote that,

We were placed in the division that was considered the refuse of the army; but the sequel will show whether this regiment, brigade and division, were not to rank among the first, for the bravery and gallantry of their conduct.<sup>13</sup>

As a final note, particularly since it is a cavalryman who is our source for the bulk of the nicknames given above, it is to be noted that no cavalry formation above a regiment ever acquired a nickname of any sort, suggesting that this formation-identity is restricted to the infantry divisions only: This may be accounted for by the facts firstly that the cavalry essentially operated by brigades, and secondly that the composition of these brigades was far more fluid than their infantry equivalents.

Other writers were more forthright than Wood in their assertions as to the value of the Divisions in which they served, as may be seen in John Kinkaid’s account of the doings of the

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<sup>11</sup> Lieut. Colonel William Tomkinson, *The Diary of a Cavalry Officer in the Peninsular and Waterloo Campaigns 1809-1815* (Staplehurst, 1999). See also John Cook and Robert Burnham, “Nicknames of British Units in the Napoleonic Wars” *The Napoleon Series* ([www.napoleon-series.org](http://www.napoleon-series.org)), viewed May 1<sup>st</sup> 2006, which dates “Enthusiastics” to the Battles of the Pyrenees, though without any explanation.

<sup>12</sup> For which, see, for example, Stephen W. Sears, *Chancellorsville* (Boston 1996), pp.64-65, 432-433.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Alistair Nichols, *Wellington’s Mongrel Regiment. A History of the Chasseurs Britanniques Regiment 1801-1814* (London, 2005), p.131.

Light Division at Fuentes de Onoro: Having described how Wellington, pulling in his endangered right flank, ordered the Light to cover the retreat of another Division – the battered Seventh, though he omits to name it – Kinkaid notes that,

The execution of our movement presented a magnificent military spectacle, as the plain between us and the right of the army was by this time in possession of the French cavalry, and, while we were retiring through it with the order and precision of a common field-day, they kept dancing around us and every instant threatening a charge without daring to execute it.

To Kincaid, the Light Division is not only superior to the French but clearly also to the other British divisions, since it alone is selected to cover the withdrawal. More generous writers did give credit where due to other formations; William Grattan's account of Salamanca, for example, refers to the "intrepid valour of the 6th Division", but clearly gives the honours of the day to the Third Division, of which his own beloved Connaught Rangers formed a part.

It must be noted, however, that a rather less favourable aspect of divisional identity and rivalry has been suggested as a key contributing factor to one of the least savoury episodes of the history of the Peninsular Army, namely the sack of San Sebastian in 1813. The first attempt by the Fifth Division to storm the place, staged on July 25<sup>th</sup>, was repulsed with losses, and accordingly a second assault was planned for August 31<sup>st</sup>. At this juncture Wellington asked for volunteers from other divisions to form storming parties to lead the assault, the main burden of which would fall again on the Fifth.<sup>14</sup> It is argued by Bruce Allen Watson that this implied snub to the men of the Fifth was responsible for their role in the subsequent sack of the town, in a transferral of anger from Wellington, who they could not

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<sup>14</sup> Oman, *Peninsular War*, Vol.VI, pp.557-586, Vol.VII, pp.6-36, 529-530.

revenge themselves upon directly and who was in any case idolised, to the unfortunate Spanish inhabitants.<sup>15</sup>

This neat psychological and sociological analysis is, however, largely a flawed one, although in fairness to Watson many of the arguments against it are noted in his study. One significant point that is not considered there, however, is the fact that whilst Wellington did issue the request for volunteers, the feeling that the men of the Fifth had failed through lack of courage was largely spread by camp gossip and subsequently repeated in journals, rather than being propagated by the commander in chief.<sup>16</sup> Wellington's order may have been an attempt at reverse psychology, simply an expression of his own frustrations, or intended as a means of providing physical rather than moral reinforcement. Watson makes a fair point when he suggests that Wellington's subsequent neglect of operations on the San Sebastian front whilst engaged with the main fighting to turn back Soult's Pyrenean offensive, may have highlighted a sense of neglect and added to confusion and demoralisation amongst those who had survived the first assault,<sup>17</sup> and repeats the view that siege work was in itself unpopular and demoralising, but fails to pick up on the similarities between the situation here and that experienced during the Badajos and Burgos sieges, and to a lesser extent the capture of Ciudad Rodrigo, which also prefigured periods of mass disorder amongst the troops. Indeed, the sack of San Sebastian, though exaggerated by accounts of those who were, crucially, not present, was, if anything, less horrific than the events seen at Badajos; we need to look for its roots in the deeper problems of collective indiscipline as experienced by the Peninsular army during its moments of great stress, and on this occasion to the unusually high officer casualties in the storm,<sup>18</sup> than in the specifics of a possible implied snub to the Fifth Division that, although

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<sup>15</sup> Bruce Allen Watson, *When Soldiers Quit. Studies in Military Disintegration* (Westport, 1997) pp. 67-88, 157-167.

<sup>16</sup> Oman *Peninsular War*, Vol.VII, pp.15-17.

<sup>17</sup> Watson, *When Soldiers Quit*, p.84.

<sup>18</sup> Oman *Peninsular War*, Vol.VII, pp.33, 529-530, records officer casualties in excess of fifty percent; see also Watson, *When Soldiers Quit*, p.86.

deeply felt, would have been insufficient in itself to tip men over the brink into anarchy. Indeed, in one sense, the fact that a perceived snub to divisional honour could be so deeply felt at this stage in the war is if anything a positive argument for the praiseworthy elements in the developing sense of unit identity, with the causes of the sack of San Sebastian ultimately lying elsewhere.

Possible negative connotations therefore notwithstanding, it can nevertheless be seen that this sense of Divisional identity reinforced rather than supplanted the sense of regimental identity that was the mainstay of the army's morale and self-identity. Pride was taken at more than one level and the impression one gets from the bulk of memoirs can roughly be summarised by the assertion that the writer's regiment was the best in the Division, and that Division the best in the army. It is less clear, particularly in those accounts that we have from the rank-and-file, to what extent this pattern continued on up with regards to seeing the Peninsular Army, in which a definite pride was also taken, as part either of the armed forces of the nation as a whole, or as representative of the nation itself. Linda Colley presents the contemporary volunteer movement as being indicative of a growing sense of patriotism and national identity,<sup>19</sup> but for regular troops forced largely to enlist through circumstance rather than patriotism it would seem that the surrogate home and family provided by the sense of regimental and divisional identity in many cases surpassed any patriotic ties.

What is also interesting is that this Regiment-Division-Army pattern, gross simplification though it is, misses out the intermediate Brigade echelon of command. There are a few exceptions where brigades were formed of troops with some obvious connection to one and other; this can be seen in the Fusilier Brigade of the Fourth Division, which has been accorded its permanent place in the military pantheon by Napier's evocative description of its charge at Albuera, or the Highland Brigade created in the Sixth Division by the 1813

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<sup>19</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London, 1992).

reorganisation. There is also an element of this in those brigades of the Waterloo and North American armies that were formed of peninsular veterans. Whilst it would seem that the brigading of the Highlanders and Fusiliers was a deliberate practice with, one assumes, the psychological intention of deliberately fostering esteem through the grouping together of components of a self-identified elite, in line with the more established practice of brigading Footguards and light infantry, this practice would seem more to be an extension of concepts of regimental identity than as supplanting the sense of divisional identity discussed here. It can still safely be asserted, therefore, that, after the regiment, the Division was the most important focus of identity and source of pride.

One of the key reasons for this may well have been the fact that, unlike the bulk of their component brigades, the divisions for the most part had very few changes of commander. Discounting brief temporary appointments while the regularly-assigned officer was on leave or recovering from wounds, the First Division had five commanders; the Second, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Portuguese three; the Third, Fourth, Light, and First and Second Cavalry two. The case of the First Division, which was in any case a little different as it was generally commanded by the second-in-command of the whole army, includes one tenure lasting only a few months cut short by sickness, and another of five weeks cut short by the capture of the officer concerned by the French – only Spencer and Kenneth Howard led it for any appreciable length of time. This level of continuity enabled an officer of character to stamp his division in his own image, as can be seen in particular with the cases of Robert Craufurd and Thomas Picton, although the importance of the former's strength of character, including its legacy after his death, is unique and another factor behind the unusual self-regard of the members of the Light Division.

The importance of the linking of the Divisional Commander with the Divisional identity is highlighted by the case of the Waterloo campaign, in which six numbered divisions

were in existence by the time the fighting began, mostly commanded by Peninsular veterans, but with numerical designations that failed to correspond to those of the formations these men had led in Portugal and Spain. This issue was felt to be of some import, however, such that Wellington wrote to Sir Henry Clinton on June 15<sup>th</sup> to canvas his views on a proposed renumbering, noting that,

Some of the General officers would wish very much to have the divisions numbered over again, and have their old numbers, which appears to be a very natural wish: and I should be very much obliged to you if you would let me know as soon as you can if you participate in it.<sup>20</sup>

Wellington's language would seem to express a favourable view of the proposal and this in turn implies a deliberate desire on his part to foster a degree of emulation of the Peninsular *esprit de corps* by his new army, notwithstanding the fact that, outside of Lowry Cole's Sixth Division – which would have become the new Fourth – the only unit thus acquiring a continuity with its Peninsular assignment would have been the 2/30th in what would have become the Fifth Division. Indeed, conversely, the 2/44th and 1/71st had numerical, though not commander, continuity under the original numbering, which would have been lost in the reorganisation. This would suggest a greater desire to emulate the reputation of the formation, as linked with its commander, than to tie in with a regimental reputation containing a link to a particular division.

This attempted continuation of identity can be seen in the way in which these divisional identities have been perpetuated and appropriated down the years. As subsequent wars saw the recreation of numbered divisions, the senior such formations began to seek continuity with their precursors in earlier wars. The Crimean Army had its Light Division in emulation of Craufurd's command, even though by then nearly the whole of the Army was

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<sup>20</sup> Wellington to Clinton, Brussels, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1815, in Colonel Gurwood (ed.), *The Despatches of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington, During his Various Campaigns in India, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, The Low Countries, and France* (Eight Vols. London, 1844), Vol.VIII, p.140.

equipped with rifles, whilst the First Division of the same force was again composed of the “Gentlemen’s Sons” with its brigade of Footguards. One new feature in that war, however, was that the Highland Brigade ultimately became the Highland Division, developing further the idea of massing the army’s self-perceived elites; this would develop further in the wars of the Twentieth Century, with the deliberate creation of numbered divisions which also had territorial or status affiliations: Highland, Light, North Midland, London, and so forth.<sup>21</sup> The attempt to seek continuity with historical namesake formations has continued from the Peninsula to the present day, with, for example, the monument of the Second Division at York Minster listing battle honours from Talavera and Vittoria through the Alma and Inkermann to Kohima and Imphal, even though the only constant feature over the century-and-a-half in question was the formation’s number. Clearly then, the system first instituted under Wellington was one which had lasting effects on the psyche of the British Army, playing an important second to Regimental identity as a motivator and source of morale. Whilst Wellington’s subordination of many administrative functions to divisional level meant that divisional staffs could remove much of the logistical burden from army headquarters, and divisional commanders could be trusted, by and large, to deal with the minutiae of tactics and leave the commander-in-chief free to oversee the “big picture”. For all these more tangible benefits, however, the psychological and motivational aspects of the system cannot be ignored, and it cannot be denied that, in the final analysis, what was begun as a purely organisational and administrative measure also ultimately, if not intentionally, became one of the key motivational ties that gave the army its sense of identity.

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Holmes, *Tommy. The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918* (London, 2004), pp.639-640