



El-Khandaq – the town in the light of some Western pre-modern sources

Isabella Welsby Sjöström¹

El-Khandaq, located on the west bank of the Nile approximately 80km south of the modern town of Dongola, was once a trading centre on the route from Darfur into the Nile Valley and Egypt. In the centre of the town lies a fort, surrounded by the pre-modern town core (Plate 1) that contains the best preserved late 19th and early 20th century domestic mud-brick buildings in northern riverine Sudan. With the construction of the Wadi Halfa to Khartoum railway at the

work at el-Khandaq with funding from the Qatar-Sudan Archaeological Project (QSAP) since 2014 and with other funding before that date, under the direction of Professor Intisar Soghayroun. The aims of the project are manifold, with the various components including excavation in and near the fort, restoration of selected buildings, study of the pre-modern town and its architecture, ethnographic research, collecting local oral traditions and legends, as well as the genealogies of the local population.

The results of the archaeological excavations and survey work being undertaken will be presented elsewhere; the present paper is concerned with an overview of what the written accounts of some 19th century European travellers and scholars of the early 20th century have to tell us, taken in conjunction with some few, but precious, early photographs and a drawing by Linant de Bellefonds.



Plate 1. Satellite view of the older town centre, the fort and part of the cemeteries (Google Earth image, 21/12.2012).

end of the 19th century the trade route shifted, and the town gradually lost its *raison d'être*. Consequently, the old town is currently virtually deserted: the merchants and their families moved to Khartoum and Omdurman during the course of the last century, although many still retain ties to the town and the title deeds to their properties there.

The University of Khartoum has been conducting field-

¹ The talk, delivered to the SARS colloquium in May 2017, that this article is based on was given with the approval and kind permission of Professor Intisar Soghayroun.

The Fort

The fort, chiefly constructed of stone in its lower courses and mud brick above, measures *c.* 150m by 70m and is known locally as ‘Qela Qela’, the red castle. Through excavation and observation we know that there were round corner towers at the south-west (Front cover), north-west and north-east corners, and one intermediate tower on the west wall. To date gates have been found roughly in the middle of the north, east and south walls. The fort features in both the pencil (pen and ink?) drawing produced by Linant de Bellefonds in 1821

and in some early photographs (late 19th and early 20th century), and from these it is clear that the fort had a range of rooms along the south wall and in the middle of the west side, besides the 'keep' by the south-west tower. Remains of these walls can still be made out, but their relationships are difficult to distinguish on the ground, and await detailed planning. Much of the western side of the fort on the higher ground is filled with considerable deposits of dung, on which some of the latest walls were built, suggesting that the interior of the fort served to stable animals, most likely sheep and goat but also perhaps cattle, donkeys or horses, possibly while occupied also by humans before the latest (now in their turn ruinous) buildings were constructed there on top of the dung deposits. Before the beginning of the current project the local farmers quarried these deposits to use as fertilizer for their fields. This practice of building on top of layers of dung can also be noticed at a number of points in the town.

It is likely, but not certain, that the inscribed or decorated stone blocks that are found built into the village houses were at some point looted from the fort. Some with Christian-style decoration may be compared to similar blocks at Old Dongola.

The town

The pre-modern houses (Plate 2) in the centre of the old town at el-Khandaq are chiefly built of mud brick, with the occasional use of *jalous*. This type of construction is described by Cailliaud, albeit at a different place, Marakah, just north of Dongola (1826 II, 8-9). Wood was used for door and window lintels and ceilings, and occasionally stone slabs for thresholds or lintels while red bricks rarely feature. The property units are built around courtyards, entered through gateways. Mostly the buildings only have one storey, but a few have one upper room, built over a ground floor room(s), creating a tower-like effect. In some cases the reception room is built on a raised platform. Ceilings are high, normally over 4m, with palm trunks (either date or dom palm) used as cross beams, with painted or incised geometric decoration surviving on some examples. Where the width of the room required it a central post was inserted for support, set on a stone post-pad. Furniture apart from beds would have been scarce (as in modern village houses in the region) but many of the rooms have wall niches of various shapes and degrees of sophistication. In almost all cases there are small windows near the ceiling on opposing walls, for ventilation. Wells are present only in a very few houses, and clearly water would have been collected and carried from the Nile by most households. Toilets also appear to have been scarce, and only rarely are 'shower rooms' encountered.

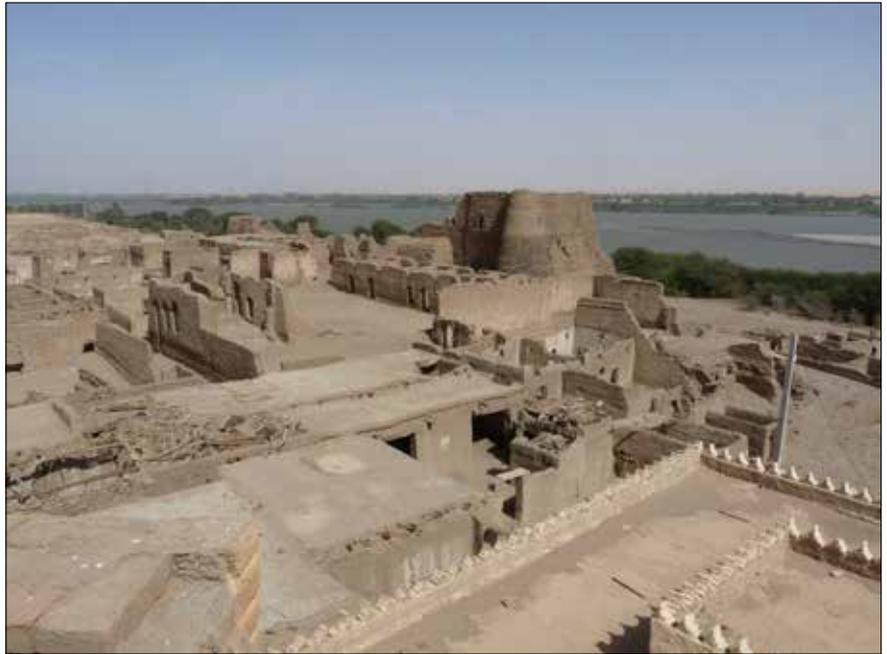


Plate 2. View of the abandoned town houses, with the fort in the background.
Photo taken from the el-Hassanab minaret, looking north-east.

Currently there are two mosques in the town, el-Hassanab (with a free-standing minaret) and el-Khatibiya, with its minaret attached to the main building. El-Hassanab was built in c. 1986, replacing an earlier mosque that was demolished to make way for the larger, modern structure. There are also three open air mosques and a *kehalwa*, this latter also a recent rebuild. Cemeteries are visible to the north, west and south of the town, and within the town there is evidence of hollow chambers – medieval vaulted multiple-occupancy tombs (*‘tuskija’*). Two of those outside the old town have so far been investigated, one near the *kehalwa* and the other on the gravel ridge to the south of the town.

During the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, the town gained various official buildings (a school, a government rest house, a police station and post office), and residences (of the *mamur*, the *wakeel* and the *mukhtar*). These structures still stand today, although only the police station retains its original function.

Written accounts

G. Waddington (1793-1869) and **B. Hanbury** (1793-1833) travelled through Sudan from the Second Cataract as far as Jebel Barkal in the years 1820-21. In their account, on November 27th 1820, "... we came to a very large ruined town, named Handech; part is situated on an eminence, and the rest, which is walled, extends along the river side for nearly half a mile; it is protected on the other side by the brown hills of the Desert; were assured that it was built by the Pagans; we observed an arch, and plaster on some of the walls; a fine tomb stands on a stony elevation behind. A caravan passing through it at the moment we were sailing by, gave an animation to its lifeless walls, and added an interest which they



would not otherwise have possessed. There are a few palms and broader cultivation above it.” (1822, 60).

They again passed el-Khandaq on New Year’s Eve (1820) and visited the town and fort: “The lower part of the South wall of the castle is built of large stones, and the upper of small ones or bricks; about the middle of this upper part are three layers of stones, not extending quite the whole length of the wall, of the size and architecture of the best temples, forming a singular contrast with the rest of the building, which is exactly like the fortresses commonly found in these countries. On the West side of it are some other stones similarly laid, but not remaining so regularly as those described ... In the inside of the castle was found a black granite mortar, very like that in the fortress at Ibrim, but much larger; and a mosque supported by some pillars. It was the palace of Malek Chowes, who, till the arrival of the Mamelouks, frequently resided at Handech as his capital; at present there seem to be scarcely two hundred people in the place ... On the left side of the road beyond the city is a burial ground, extending for above half a mile along the edge of the Desert ...” (Waddington and Hanbury 1822, 260-61).

Frédéric Cailliaud (1787-1869) passed by el-Khandaq on January 29th, 1821,² on his way south: “... at noon we saw Hellet el-Handak, a fairly extensive village situated near the river; one notices there a large castle or fortress, built by the Musulmans, which presents the same kind of construction as those I have already spoken of.” (Cailliaud 1826, 15-16). The kind of construction referred to is presumably his earlier description of the fort that is today known as Qasr Wad Nimeiri, “one sees tall walls of earth (unfired bricks)” (Cailliaud 1826, 12), which fits well with el-Khandaq, although we may assume that he only saw it from a distance, as the stonework in the towers would surely have merited further description.

Linant de Bellefonds (1799-1883) visited el-Khandaq on the 24th September 1821, a Monday: “At two o’clock in the afternoon we arrived at Andak, an old and large village ... There are many completely ruined houses and, on the north side, on the bank of the Nile, the remains of a fortress built partly in mud bricks, and partly in rough stone, and also a part in cut stone, which proves that this place was once more considerable than the ordinary ruins one sees. The whole was well built and in the style of all these ancient villages that one finds on the banks of the Nile. I don’t know if this village is Christian, not having seen any remains of churches, but I would be inclined to believe that it is much older than the time when the Christians established themselves in this

² Cailliaud met Waddington and Hanbury on January 14th 1821, at 34° 34’ 45”N 28° 18’E, according to Cailliaud, in the district of Moshi: “We merely exchanged a few words of civility in passing, and proceeded on our respective destinations with as much indifference as if we had met in the park or on the boulevards” (Waddington and Hanbury 1822, 257). For his part, Cailliaud found Waddington in particular extraordinarily unhelpful and unforthcoming (Cailliaud 1826 I, 395-96).

country. I found in the citadel a large granite vase, three feet tall and one and a half wide. It has the shape of a truncated cone and had around it a line of hieroglyphs. I did not see them well enough to be able to make a drawing. This vase made me presume that there was a monument of the same type. I searched a lot in both the fortress and among the houses outside its walls, but I found nothing in an Egyptian style.” (Linant de Bellefonds 1958, 30).

The fate of the vase is unknown at present. Given that the visits by Linant and Waddington and Hanbury are barely nine months apart, it is conceivable that they are talking about the same stone vessel, but until at least one of the objects is rediscovered we shall never know. What is more interesting is that Waddington and Hanbury, like Linant, describe the town and particularly the fort as being in ruins.

Charles Cuny (1811-1858) son-in-law of Linant de Bellefonds, set out from Asyut in 1857 on a journey to Darfur via Kordofan. He died from disease, or was murdered, sometime after the 25th May 1858, the date of his last letter. This was sent to Egypt together with the first part of his journal, which forms the basis for an edited version of his diaries, published posthumously in 1863 by V. A. Malte-Brun. Of interest in Cuny’s account are lists of wells and staging posts on the route from Darfur to el-Khandaq. “Wednesday, 24 February [1858]. Arrival at Hendek, once the seat of a melik. There is a school of some fifty children. The Doctor [Cuny] makes a beeline for the mosque, to please its imam ... Several people suffering from cataracts are brought to him, whom he cannot operate, given the imminence of his departure. ... He also finds from the only ambulant druggist of Hendek the *semgh abou baka* (gum of the father of tears), a resin that oozes from a tree very common in Kordofan, and that is also called gafal. The dose is of 2 to 3 gros [?] to produce a purgative effect of heroic dimensions, such as the Sudanese want. ... No one at Hendek has wanted to admit that from there one can reach Darfur in seven days; they are certain of it, but do not want to admit it ... At Hendek there are tombs dug in the limestone that contain mummies. The ruined palace of the Mek, located in the middle of the town, encloses a large number of vaults that are covered by the ruins; the bones indicate that they belonged to individuals of gigantic size. Tradition retails that in the palace there is an individual buried with the saddle of his horse, his cushion, bridle, etc. These tombs contain no inscription that could indicate of what period are the remains that they enclose. Outside the palace and fortress, located along the river bank, there is a church that one could still enter a few years ago.” (1863, 49-50, 56).

Lord Edward Gleichen (1863-1937) – At the time of preparing his two-volume compendium on *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (1905), el-Khandaq housed the Headquarters of the District and the residence of the *mamur*. The information provided here is particularly interesting as it is given from a military perspective, which offers us some insight into the strategic potential of the site in earlier times as well.

“The town could be easily defended against a force coming down river or across the desert from the west. Broken mud wall on west and north sides. Old sundried brick fort in middle of town on the bank; good storage, accommodation for 200 men (British); commands town and approaches. Also 4 well-built brick houses in the town, capable of housing 300 men. Town of mud huts clean and well built. Market day on Saturday. Four hundred and forty *sagias* in the district, each representing four families. Much wood in the district. Road west into desert to Marghoun, etc. Remains of many churches” (1905, I, 29).

Exactly what the remains of the ‘many churches’ consisted of is unclear, as we know from other accounts that this was not literally true. Perhaps it is based on local informants speaking in general terms of ancient remains, (*‘kanisa katir’*), in the case of el-Khandaq possibly referring to the vaulted tombs dotted around the town.

John Ward (1832-1912, artist, traveller and member of the Egypt Exploration Fund Committee). In his book, *Our Sudan, Its Pyramids and Progress*, the information was not principally collected by the author (it shares almost verbatim the information on el-Khandaq given in Gleichen); but we are given one small titbit of information regarding the small bazaar: “Colonel Penton bought some scarabs at this bazaar, which he gave me; they are genuine, but late in date, about 500 B.C.” (1905, 58). Given the trade links of el-Khandaq, there is, of course, no way to know the actual provenance of the scarabs, nor can we be certain that Ward’s dating of them was correct.

E. A. Wallis Budge (1857-1934) makes a claim that there was once an Egyptian temple at el-Khandaq. It is unclear what this is based on, as Budge does not provide any clues as to his reasoning “Unfortunately a mosque has been built over the remains of the temple...” (1907, I, 615). One can only surmise that he visited the fort and saw the cut-stone walls and the stone niche in a wall belonging to the citadel, but this niche cannot be a *mihrab*, as it faces west. Budge’s theory may have been inspired by Waddington and Hanbury’s account and their speculations on the evidence they presented, especially if taken in conjunction with the granite vessel bearing a hieroglyphic inscription that Linant de Bellefond describes, but it is not certain that Budge had read Linant’s diary, unpublished at the time, and it is not listed in his Bibliography. In 1950 Crawford states that the diary is stored at the Griffiths Institute in Oxford.

Baedeker Guide to Egypt and Sudan (1914). El-Khandaq is listed as one of the stops on the steamer route between Kareima and Kerma, but the only detail given is that it has a rest house (Baedeker 1914, 420).

O. G. S. Crawford (1886-1957), a British archaeologist and geographer, gives a description of the town in *The Funj Kingdom of Senaar* (1951, 36-38 and pls 8-10). Crawford appears to have had limited time at his disposal at el-Khandaq (“It is a place one would like to explore.” 1951, 38) and his description consists largely of information from earlier travel-

lers: Waddington and Hanbury, Linant de Bellefonds, Lord Prudhoe (whose diary it has not been possible to consult here) and Gleichen. What he observed for himself includes the information that he was shown one of the brick-vaulted tombs: “Beside the track leading from the landing-stage to the town, just before one reaches the castle” (1951, 37). Based on photographs taken from the steamer in the early 1900s the landing stage was immediately to the south of the castle, but Crawford also says “North of the town, near the landing-stage, is a Moslem graveyard with many qubbas;” (1951, 38) - the stage presumably moved in accordance with the shifting of the sandbanks in the river. There is also mention of the town wall, no longer visible in Crawford’s day (Crawford 1951, 37, after Prudhoe, *Diary*, 9/2/1829; Gleichen 1905 I, 29).

Ugo Monneret de Villard (1881-1954) was principally interested in the Christian antiquities of Nubia. He published three funerary inscriptions in Greek from el-Khandaq, frustratingly without being able to give their exact provenance, as he saw them in the National Museum in Khartoum; these are numbered 19-21 (SNM accession numbers). Number 19 is dated by Lajtar (1992, 220) to the 9th/10th century AD; no. 21 is today on display in the museum at Kerma. Monneret de Villard also mentions that an amphora stand (SNM 26) ‘similar to that from Meilnarti’ and some ceramic fragments from el-Khandaq are in the museum (1938, 242). New inscriptions have recently been found in the course of the current excavations in the fort.

A. J. Arkell (1898-1980) in his *A History of the Sudan to 1821* makes a brief reference to el-Khandaq (1961, 196). He argued that the round towers of the type that occur not only at el-Khandaq, but also at the rectangular forts at Sai, Bakhit and Merowe East were inspired by the Crusader forts in the Middle East, a theory that has not been proven. He is effectively a secondary source on el-Khandaq, and thus contributes nothing of direct value in the present context, although he is of interest in tracing the development of our understanding of the history of the town.

Apart from the sources referred to above, in the diary of the Egyptologist **F. W. Green** (1869-1949), kept during the course of a journey to Sudan in the company of the Reverend Archibald Sayce and George Somers Clarke, the entry dated 7.1.1910 reads: “At Khandak is a very picturesque mud fort built on what seems to me who saw it only from the steamer, to be old Egyptian crude brick work. This is on the left Bank.” The fact that the party did not stop at el-Khandaq rules out the possibility that either Sayce or Somers Clarke could have made further observations on the town.

Pictographic clues

Both photographers and artists seem to have focused on depicting the town from the boats they were travelling on. From their work we can observe some aspects of the increasing decay of the Qela Qela fort from the early 19th century on-



wards, and the emergence of some of the colonial buildings on the river bank. In Linant's drawing we can see the keep and south fort wall apparently in a good state of repair, with buildings in the interior, moving then to the increasingly ruined state of the same wall in a photograph taken by Insinger in 1883 and then in photographs by R.V. Savile (1906-07, SAD A11-005), Cameron (c. 1912-18, SAD899-2-26) and Griffiths (1930, Kawa Album I p056-24-3-29-30).³ There are also literal 'snapshots' of the landing stage of the Nile steamers just south of the fort (Savile 1906-07, SAD_A11-006 and Griffiths 1930, Kawa Album I p082-27-1-30-31), but we have little material that documents the inner part of the town. In a photo by a Major Phipps dating to before 1905 we see the Hassanab minaret, as yet (or at any rate at the time) without its central brick feature; in the same photo we also see the large storehouse of el-Nour el-Kabir when it still had (part of) its second storey, as well as a market place to the right of the east wall of the storehouse (in Ward 1905, 58): today the area is built over by houses.

The earliest photograph known of el-Khandaq is that taken by J. H. Insinger (1854-1918) in 1883 (cf. Insinger 2004, fig. 31). It was taken almost exactly from the same vantage point as Linant's sketch, upstream on a boat (or possibly a sand-bank/island), looking north towards the town and the south wall of the fort: we can see that the house of Abdullah Bey Hamza was complete at the time, whereas it appears destroyed in the photos of some 25 years later. It would seem that the cause may have been a shell fired by the Mahdists at some point during the intervening years.

Conclusion

To sum up the information that can be deduced from the various sources above, we know that the fort at el-Khandaq was in a poor state of repair already in the 1820s and in 1857 it is described as ruinous (Cuny 1863, 56), and that at the time the town (probably more or less corresponding to what appears to be the core today) was/had been surrounded by a wall, remnants of which were still visible to the west and north of the town as recently as 1905. Today all trace of this town wall appears to have vanished. A granite vessel bearing a hieroglyphic inscription was seen in the fort in 1821, and this, together with the reused squared stone blocks in the fort walls appears to have given rise to the idea that the site was inhabited in the Pharaonic/Kushite period. However, the portable nature of the granite vessel means that we cannot be

³ The first two photos are held in the Sudan Archive in Durham, the third in the Griffith Institute in Oxford, and will be discussed together with others in greater depth in the final publication of the present project.

sure of its provenance; the same caveat applies to the scarabs that were purchased in the bazaar in the early 20th century. The presence of finely cut 'ashlar' blocks in the fort walls was remarked on first by Waddington and Hanbury (1822, 219-20) in the south wall (now mostly destroyed), but others are still visible today in the citadel, particularly in the south-west corner (Plate 3). These must derive from a medieval, if not earlier, building of note. The fact that the windows in the wall (Plate 4) were not mentioned by any of the 19th



Plate 3. The keep in the south-west corner of the fort. Note the better cut stone blocks in the wall facing the viewer, and the deep niche, possibly a storage compartment seen in section.

century accounts may indicate that the area was hidden from view by private houses. Anecdotal references to a church or churches, both outside (Cuny and Gleichen) and inside the fort (Crawford), and the presence of red-brick fragments suggest their presence but remains unproven on the ground. The presence of the vaulted *toskija* tombs found both to



Plate 4. The west (external) wall of the keep.

the north and south of the town, as well as (supposedly) within the fort itself (Cuny 1863, 56), are almost certainly of Christian date, and the pottery sherds, make it more than likely that at least one church had existed.

The heyday of the site remains in dispute, as the accounts suggest that, although inhabited throughout the 19th century, the settlement, and particularly the fort, was in some state of disrepair. We can assume that at the latest the 18th century saw the structure fully functioning. Thereafter the need for a defensive structure must have passed, or at least the funds required to repair it were unavailable. The thick deposits of animal dung within the fort may not mean that it went through periods of abandonment, but simply that animals were quartered there alongside humans. For example, in the Ottoman fort at Sai there are also thick, overbuilt layers of humic material. Certainly the various building techniques employed in the construction of the fort walls (rough stone, some square cut blocks, and mud brick) indicate different phases of restoration or reconstruction. The earliest evidence for occupation on the site that has so far been found *in situ* are Medieval pottery sherds within the fort, where post-medieval ceramic fragments are also common.

El-Khandaq is arguably the best preserved example of a pre-modern town in northern Sudan, but there are other locations that offer parallels, most notably the buildings in the deserted 'modern' village at Old Dongola (46.5km as the crow flies upriver) and the fort and surrounding (ruined) buildings at Qasr Wad Nimeiri (c. 47km downriver). It is difficult to date these structures, but comparative dating of the architecture, when it has been studied more comprehensively, is a possibility.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the Qatar-Sudan Archaeological Project, the University of Khartoum, the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums and the people of el-Khandaq for making the research possible. Derek Welsby kindly provided reference material.

The translations of the excerpts from Cailliaud, Linant de Bellefonds and Cuny are by the author.

Bibliography

- Arkell, A. J. 1961. *A History of the Sudan from the earliest times to 1821*. London.
- Baedeker, K. 1914. *Egypt and the Súdán. Handbook for travellers*. Leipzig.
- Budge, E. A. W. 1907. *The Egyptian Sudan*. London.
- Cailliaud, F. 1826. *Voyage a Méroé et au Fleuve Blanc au delà de Fazoql dans le midi du royaume de Sennar, a Syouab et dans cinq autres oasis; fait dans les années 1819, 1820, 1821 et 1822*. Vol. 2. L'Imprimerie Royale, no location.
- Crawford, O. G. S. 1951. *The Funj Kingdom of Sennar, with a Geographical Account of the Middle Nile Region*. Gloucester.
- Cuny, C. 1863. *Journal de Voyage du Dr Charles Cuny de Siout a el-Obéid du 22 Novembre 1857 au 5 avril 1858*. Edited by V.A. Malte-Brun. Paris.
- Gleichen, A. E. W. (ed.) 1905. *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan; a compendium prepared by officers of the Sudan Government*. 2 vols. London.

- Insinger, J. H. 2004. *In Het Land Der Nijlcataracten (1883)*. Edited and with a foreword by M. J. Raven. Leiden.
- Lajtar, A. 1992. 'A Greek Christian inscription from el-Chandaq, Nubia'. *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 94, 217-220.
- Linant de Bellefonds, L. M. A. 1958. *Journal d'un voyage à Méroé dans les années 1821 et 1822*. Edited by M. Shinnie. Khartoum.
- Monneret de Villard, U. 1938. *La Nubia Medioevale*. Vol. 1. Le Caire.
- Waddington, G. and B. Hanbury 1822. *Journal of a visit to some parts of Ethiopia*. London.
- Ward, J. 1905. *Our Sudan. Its Pyramids and Progress*. London.