In recent years, Sato Tsugitaka, a leading scholar of medieval Islamic history with publications on a wide range of subjects such as land tenure systems, military slavery, and Islamic saint worship has turned his attention to the history of sugar in the medieval Muslim world.(1) As is generally known, the words “sugar” in English, “sucre” in French, and “Zucker” in German derive from the Arabic “sukkar.” The Crusaders first brought sugar to Europe from the Muslim Levant in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This condiment, highly valued in the West, soon became one of the most important commodities of the medieval Mediterranean trade. The technology of manufacturing sugar developed in medieval Islam and spread as far as the Iberian Peninsula, where it was adopted by Portugal and Spain during the Reconquista. Beginning in the sixteenth century, European sugar plantations in the New World, such as those in the Caribbean and Brazil, inherited the expertise of Muslim origin. Thus, the Muslim world occupies a seminal place in the history of sugar. However, while the sugar plantations of the New World, the sugar cane-growing and sugar-refining activities of China, and the marketing and consumption of sugar in Europe have attracted much scholarly attention[Lippmann 1890; Deerr 1949–1950; Blume 1985; Mintz 1985; Daniels 1996; Mazumdar 1998], little interest has been paid to the history of sugar in the medieval Muslim world before the large-scale entry of Europe.
into the global sugar market. The present work is a compilation of Sato’s multifaceted inquiries into this topic, which rely on medieval Arabic sources.

One of the great merits of this book is its grasp of the international scale of sugar production and trade before the European and American phases of this commodity’s history. On the basis of many geographical sources such as Ibn Ḥawqal’s *Kitāb Šūrat al-Ard*, ʿIṣṭakhrī’s *Kitāb Masālik al-Mamālik*, and Muqaddasi’s *Aḥsan al-Taqāṣim*, Sato begins his history by tracing the dissemination of sugar processing from India in the first century to Persia by the beginning of seventh century and then, after the conquests and expansion of Islam, to Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and the Muslim Mediterranean. In chapter 2, he relies on Nuwayrī’s encyclopedic source *Nihāyat al-Arab* to explain fully the methods of sugar cane culture and sugar refining in fourteenth century Egypt. In addition, on the basis of his careful analysis of contemporary sources, the author overturns the established idea that sugar production was maintained by slave labor. Since European sugar plantations in the New World exploited such labor, many have simplistically assumed the existence of a parallel reality in the pre-modern Muslim world. In the following chapter, Sato focuses on sugar as commodity, revealing its distribution in the Eastern Muslim world under the Abbasids up to around the tenth century; the development of sugar-refining, including ruling class involvement, during and after this time in Egypt; and sugar’s commercial value in the Mediterranean trade. By using Ibn al-Ḥājj’s *al-Madkhal* and al-Shayzārī and Ibn al-Ukhuwwa’s *Hisba* manuals as primary sources, he uncovers the labor conditions of sugar refineries and dealings on sugar markets, touching on such subjects as merchant illegality and the surveys of *muḥtasibs* (market inspectors). The author then confirms the fact that Kārimī merchants, who were known for their wealth and the scope of their dealings, were involved not only in the international spice trade but also in the sugar trade. He presents the rise and fall of the Kharrūbīs, a wealthy merchant family in Mamluk Egypt, as an example of this commercial elite.(2)

At this point, the book shifts its perspective from the production and distribution of sugar to its use. On the basis of his analysis of pharmaceutical texts such as Ibn al-Baytār’s *al-Jāmi‘ li-Mufradāt al-Adwiya wal-Aghdhiya* and Ibn al-Nafīs’s *al-Šāmil fī al-Ṣinā‘at al-Ṭibbīya*, Sato discusses the belief that sugar was effective for various kinds of diseases, for example, stomach pains, eye diseases, colds, and asthma. Cairo pharmacists (ʿaṭṭār) who sold it in their shops did a splendid business when the plague raged in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries.
In chapter 6, the author vividly explores the imperial gifts and grants of sugar at various festivals and celebrations such as ‘Īd al-Fiṭr and the Meccan pilgrimage; it also functioned as a political instrument of the caliphs and sultans of the Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk dynasties. Turning to texts on cookery (ṭabīk) and repasts (ghidhā’) and on The Thousand and One Nights, the author then reveals the enlivening role of sugar on the tables of rulers and the rich in Baghdad and Cairo. Furthermore, he indicates that beginning in the eleventh century, sugar gradually became a more popular condiment; it was fashioned into the forms of horses, lions, cats, and other animals and suspended in stalls at the sweets market in Cairo during the fifteenth century. By that time, these treats were purchased by both the rich and the masses for their children. On the basis of this fact, Sato undercuts the accepted notion that sugar was a luxury consumed only by the powerful and wealthy.

This book is an impressive history of sugar in the medieval Muslim world, founded on a careful scrutiny of many sources of various genres, including chronicles; geographies; itineraries; encyclopedias; and agricultural, pharmaceutical, and gastronomic texts. Furthermore, the author’s research extends beyond such manuscripts. He confirmed the reliability of his sources by visiting an agricultural laboratory, where he learned about the methods of sugar refining; by going to a market in Damascus, where he observed the shape of locally produced sugar; and by examining unearthed old tools used in sugar production. He experienced excitement when he encountered an unglazed, sugar-refining pot, an ublūj, at a Jordanian museum and found that its shape coincided with the description of the same item in a written source; this last episode gives us a glimpse of the author’s passion for the history of sugar.

Overall, this study throws new light on the subject; nevertheless, some questions are inadequately treated in the text. Most important, Sato does not directly confront the traditional view that Egyptian sugar production declined in the fifteenth century; rather, he avoids delving deeply into the issue, perhaps because his sources have little to say about it. From my point of view, because waqf (Islamic endowment) deeds show that the sultans and amirs often held sugar-related facilities such as sugar cane presses as private property and still endowed them as waqf in the fifteenth century, it appears that Egyptian sugar production was not in a state of complete decay at that time. However, an inquiry into this issue may be demanding too much of the book, whose original theme is that of sugar in the “daily life” of the Muslim world.
Its vivid depiction of this condiments secure place within this social formation is of interest both to specialists and to the general public. Academically, Sato’s study is a very valuable work that greatly refines our knowledge of the history of sugar, not only in the Muslim countries but also in Europe and China.

Notes

(1) Sato [2004] is a brief study on this subject.
(2) Sato [2006] is also dealing with this family.

References


