



**Book Review: Tsugitaka Sato, Sugar in the Social life of
Medieval Islam. Islamic Area Studies, vol. 1
(Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2015). Pp. xii, 232**

Mohamed Ouerfelli

► **To cite this version:**

Mohamed Ouerfelli. Book Review: Tsugitaka Sato, Sugar in the Social life of Medieval Islam. Islamic Area Studies, vol. 1 (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2015). Pp. xii, 232. Mamluk Studies Review, 2017, 20, pp.247-251. 10.6082/M1C827FG . halshs-01689660

HAL Id: halshs-01689660

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01689660>

Submitted on 22 Jan 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Book Reviews

Tsugitaka Sato, *Sugar in the Social life of Medieval Islam*. Islamic Area Studies, vol. 1 (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2015). Pp. xii, 232.

Reviewed by Mohamed Ouerfelli, Aix Marseille Université

Tsugitaka Sato is not unknown in the world of research on medieval Islam; he devoted many years of research to the system of *iqṭāʿ*, to tax matters in the Muslim East, and especially to the rural history of Egypt in the late Middle Ages.

His latest project, completed shortly before his sudden death in 2011, was to publish a book on the history of sugar in the medieval East, that is, a revised version of a book he published in Japanese in 2008 under the title *Sato no Isuramu seikatsushi* (Sugar in the social life of medieval Islam).

The book includes an extensive bibliography on the East in general, but it is flawed on the subject of sugar in the Mediterranean. Many studies were published, notably on the western Mediterranean, but the author was unaware of their existence.

The book consists of seven chapters with a prologue and an epilogue; five figures; and a map and a glossary complete it. We can only regret the absence of analysis of the archaeological material which is abundant in the Middle East. Many excavations have been carried out in sugar refineries, allowing comparisons to be made with the written sources¹.

In his introduction, the author announces the aim of the publication of this research: despite recently published works, including ours,² he believes that many aspects of the history of sugar in the Muslim East still have to be elucidated. First, the Iraqi and Iranian regions have not been sufficiently studied. Second, clay forms or barrels played a leading role in the refining of sugar; these should be studied in more detail. The third point requiring further research is Dār al-Qand in Fustat, which was the center of tax collection by the authorities in Egypt.³ Finally, the author believes that in revisiting the Arab sources, he was able to bring about a better understanding of the relationship between sugar and power

¹ P. Brigitte-Porée, "Les moulins et fabriques à sucre de Palestine et de Chypre: histoire, géographie et technologie d'une production croisée et médiévale," in *Cyprus and the Crusaders: Papers given at the international conference "Cyprus and the crusaders," Nicosie, 6–9 septembre 1994*, ed. N. Coureas and J. Riley-Smith (Nicosie, 1995), 377–510.

² M. Ouerfelli, *Le sucre, production, commercialisation et usages dans la Méditerranée médiévale*, The Medieval Mediterranean, vol. 71 (Leiden-Boston, 2008).

³ On the role of this office, see M. Ouerfelli, "Organisation spatiale et répercussions de l'industrie du sucre sur le paysage urbain: Fustât et Palerme (XIVe–XVe siècle)," in *Villes méditerranéennes au Moyen Âge*, ed. É. Malamut and M. Ouerfelli (Aix-en-Provence, 2014), 199–200.



by examining the uses of this product during the celebrations and the banquets organized by caliphs and sultans, at which sugar was given as a gift, especially during the reigns of the Ayyubids and Mamluks.

The first chapter, devoted to “The Origin of sugar production and its expansion to West Asia,” attempts to identify the origins of the expansion of this new plant and the routes it used to reach the Mediterranean world. But the author does not clearly explain the circumstances and dates of arrival of the Far East sugarcane to Persia nor the terms of its passage to the Middle East; he often merely cites the texts of chroniclers, geographers, and Arab travelers of the tenth century, whose limits we are all aware of. Few texts are selected by the author to build his analyses, which are mostly lacking in depth. The major changes that marked the sugar industry in the region are not addressed; the author is only following the conclusions of Elyahu Ashtor on the decline of the sugar industry, which were called into question long ago.⁴

Chapter 2 on production techniques does not bring anything new, except the translated text of al-Nuwayrī, actually known for a long time. The comparisons proposed by the author between the techniques used in China and those in Egypt are limited to the use of clay forms (*ublūgh*). Significant progress marked the sugar industry in Egypt and Syria, which reached China afterwards, and which literally contrasted with paper production techniques that took the opposite path, but the contexts are totally different, limiting the scope of the author’s conclusions.

The comparison would be more relevant with the production centers of the western Mediterranean (Sicily, Valencia, Granada). In fact, the actual technical issues primarily relate to production efficiency, in which authorities had a special interest. It is also surprising that the author did not use other sources, particularly archaeological works, to complete the typology of sugar forms produced in the Middle East, as well as the categories of sugar, of which he provides a list that is far from complete. Why does he not mention the sugar of Damascus when it is the most common category and the most widely distributed in the major market places of the Mediterranean world?

“On camels and ships: sugar as commodity,” the title given to Chapter 3, implies the transport of sugar on camels and ships, but the author gives no information on this issue. Similarly, the developments devoted to the Baghdadi district of Karkh also give the impression that in the Abbasid era this neighborhood became a center of sugar production and trade. However, there is nothing in the text that indicates the existence of production structures in this area; the few figures provided by chronicles show that this is a small production coming from southwestern Iran to supply the caliph’s court and the princely mansions. We also know that sugar is exported from Egypt to Iraq. The Karkh district was certainly

⁴ Sato, 25.

prosperous thanks to the dynamism of the Baghdadi merchant bourgeoisie, and was full of products from all sources, but nothing allows the author to assume any development of the sugar trade and industry in Baghdad.

The titles of subchapters announced by the author often leave the reader disappointedly yearning for more; in “The Managers of sugar production in al-Fuṣṭāṭ,”⁵ the few texts presented on sugar refineries do not allow one to have a clue about the terms of their management and their location in the space of the city.

Likewise, the few lines written on “The Trade with Italian merchants in Alexandria” are very ordinary, reflecting a lack of familiarity with research on the Mediterranean trade, in which Egypt and Syria played a central role. The author should have read the many works of Ashtor and the present author’s chapter on the actors of the sugar trade in the Mediterranean.⁶ The same applies to the issue of sugar prices and their evolution, completely obscured, though it would help to determine whether sugar is a luxury product or not and whether its consumption is widespread enough to affect disadvantaged groups.

Regarding the commercial world, the author highlights the role played by Jewish businessmen in the trade of this luxury product, but the few texts taken from the work of Goitein are not enough to demonstrate how the involvement of the members of this community evolved in the stages of production and marketing of sugar.⁷ Though they were among the first to invest in this activity and get involved in the sale of sugar and products made of sugar, they found themselves in the late Middle Ages relegated to a secondary position due to the limits of their financial means.

As for Kārimī merchants, discussed by many works that the author cites little or not at all, their role in the sugar trade is difficult to assess due to lack of statistics on the extent of the sugar business they conduct compared with the spice trade, which represents the heart of the activities of the siblings. Though the Kārimī have several sugar refineries and intervene in its traffic, we should not overstate this role, inasmuch as they are not the only actors and they are in competition with other merchants, the great amirs, and the sultan himself—the largest producer and consumer of sugar.

In the chapter on “Sugar as medicine,” the author mainly uses the work of botanist Ibn al-Bayṭār, who summarizes the views of his predecessors, but does not explain the progress of the introduction of sugar into the pharmacopoeia and

⁵ Sato, 60–62.

⁶ Ouerfelli, *Le sucre*, 435–42.

⁷ M. Ouerfelli, “Le rôle des communautés juives dans la production et le commerce du sucre en Méditerranée au Moyen Âge: les exemples de l’Égypte et de la Sicile,” *Chrétiens, Juifs et Musulmans dans la Méditerranée médiévale: Études en hommage à Henri Bresc*, ed. Benoît Grévin, Annli-ese Nef, and Emmanuelle Tixier (Paris, 2008), 57–74.

medicine from Persia, particularly to Baghdad, where the translation movement of Greek works and Indo-Persian happened. The influx of Nestorian practitioners and their entering into the service of the Abbasid caliphs allowed the introduction of new forms of drugs and especially the use of sugar in the preparation of medicines. Long before Ibn al-Baytār, many practitioners had written formularies originally inspired by a format of organization established by Galen in his *De Compositione medicamentorum*, like that of Ibn Ishāq al-Kindī or that of Sabūr Ibn Sahl.

In the last chapter on the kitchen, the author has partially exploited culinary treatises drafted in the East. One is surprised by the absence of the *Kitāb al-wuṣṣā ilā al-ḥabīb fī waṣf al-ṭayyibāt wa-al-ṭīb*, studied in 1949 by Maxime Rodinson, whose eleven extant manuscripts clearly show a wide distribution in the Muslim world. Sugar is present in this treatise; it is used in 33% of recipes.⁸ The same applies to the anonymous *Kanz al-fawā'id fī tanwī' al-mawā'id*,⁹ which draws its information on medical-pharmaceutical treatises in earlier cookbooks. This treatise provides materials of remarkable interest for a study of the uses of sugar, not only in cooking but also in the preparation of drinks and cosmetics.

Ultimately, the aims announced by the author are far from being achieved; the subjects to which he thought he would bring something new were well known before this publication. Discussions on Iraq and Iran remain at the level of mere description, without any real reflection on the evolution of production structures, trade, and sugar consumption. We do not learn more about the role of *ublūgh*; the author has ignored the archaeological works, although they are many and are likely to provide accurate information about the production of clay forms and their typology based on the packaging of different sugar varieties.

The expansion of the sugar industry from East to West and the consumption of this product underwent important developments that the author ignored, instead merely juxtaposing texts on various aspects of sugar in the East, resulting in a lack of clear and firm conclusions. The synthesis the work offers suffers from numerous methodological problems.

The imbalance of treatment between Iraq and Syria on the one hand, and Egypt on the other hand, is obvious. It is more marked for Iran, although the author announced plans to conduct a further study on it. How can one speak of origins without giving dates or specify the context and the actors of the introduction of sugar cane?

Undeniably, Sato ignored an entire sector of research on many aspects of the history of sugar in the Muslim East; in addition, he did not read enough of the

⁸ "Recherches sur les documents arabes relatifs à la cuisine," *Revue des études islamiques* 17 (1949): 95–165.

⁹ Ed. M. Marín and D. Waines (Beirut, 1993).

present author's work, from which he could have drawn some benefit allowing him to make his work more clear in its objectives and more rigorous in its methodology.