Chapter 5

Sugar as Medicine

We have so far discussed sugarcane cultivation, sugar production technologies, sugar as commodity, and the vicissitudes of sugar merchants in medieval Muslim societies. In addition to its roles in sweeteners and as a commodity, sugar was also important as a medicine and for its use in festivals. In this chapter, we will examine how various kinds of sugar were used as medicines by Ibn al-Bayṭār, a famous pharmacologist, and Ibn al-Nafīs, a personal physician of Sultan Baybars. We will also examine the activities of the druggists who sold sugar as a medicine.

A Comprehensive Book of Simple Drugs by Ibn al-Bayṭār

Ibn al-Bayṭār ʿAbd Allāh al-Mālaqī (d. 646/1248) was considered a leading pharmacologist (ʿashshāb) of the Islamic world. He was born in Málaga at the end of the twelfth century, and studied botany and pharmacology in Sevilla under Muwaḥḥid Dynasty rule. Arabic biographies tell us that he recorded in great detail the names, shapes, medicinal effects, and native growing areas of numerous herbs while he worked under such masters as Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Nabaṭī, ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṣāliḥ, and Abū al-Ḥajjāj. Around 617/1220, Ibn al-Bayṭār left his homeland for the eastern Islamic world and arrived at the Ayyubid capital city of Cairo via Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.1 Cairo, at that time, was beginning to stand out as a new center of economics and culture in the Islamic world, regardless of ongoing political unrest in Baghdad.

According to his disciple, Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa (d. 668/1270), when Ibn al-Bayṭār arrived in Cairo, he was appointed by Sultan al-Kāmil as the “head of all pharmacologists” (raʾīs ’alā sāʾir al-ʿashshābiyyīn).2 While living in Cairo, he conducted new research on herbs, visiting the countries of Agāriqa (Greece) and Rūm.

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Even after Sultan al-Kāmil died, Ibn al-Bayṭār was welcomed by his son al-Ṣāliḥ. Not long after, however, he moved to Damascus, where he published an annotated edition (tafsīr) of Materia Medica by Dioscorides and conducted research in the suburbs with assistants including his disciple, Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a. Ibn al-Bayṭār was a strong, respectable, and honest man who wholly devoted himself to the study of pharmacology. He died in Damascus in the winter of 646/1248, shortly before the collapse of the Ayyubid dynasty.3

Ibn al-Bayṭār compiled two major works; al-Mughnī fi al-Adwiyat al-Mufrada (A Corpus of Simple Remedies), and al-Jāmiʿ li-Mufradāt al-Adwiya wal-Aghdhiya (A Comprehensive Book of Simple Drugs and Foods). Here, we will look at the latter work, A Comprehensive Book of Simple Drugs, which is a pharmaceutical encyclopedia listing over 1,400 kinds of simple pharmaceutical substances (adwiya mufrada), excluding compound drugs (adwiya murakkaba). Each item is explained from Ibn al-Bayṭār’s personal observations and quoting from over 260 sources by authors including Dioscorides, Galen, al-Rāzī, Ibn Sīnā, and al-Idrīsī.4 Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a states, “We can not find any book as excellent as the al-Jāmiʿ li-Mufradāt al-Adwiya.”5 As Peter E. Pormann and Emilie Savage-Smith state,6 we can also understand Ibn al-Bayṭār’s pharmacopoeia to be the most influential of all Arabic treatises on basic pharmaceutical substances since the mid-thirteenth century.

Sugar in the Comprehensive Book of Simple Drugs
In the Comprehensive Book of Simple Drugs entry for “sukkar”, Ibn al-Bayṭār thoroughly explains the medicinal effects of sugar, quoting the works of physicians and pharmacologists. The following is a full translation of the Arabic text.

Dioscorides [first century] relates: sugar (sukkar) is a kind of honey (ʿasal), but solid. In fertile lands like al-Hind and Maghrib, it is found on [sugar] cane.7 It looks like salt, and is similarly brittle when bitten with teeth. And if one drinks it with water, he feels refreshed. It is also effective

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4 J. Vernet believes that the al-Jāmiʿ li-Mufradāt of Ibn al-Bayṭār is merely plagiarized from the pharmacopoeia of al-Ghāfiqi (el2, s.v. Ibn al-Bayṭār). But, it should be noted that his account is based on his observations of herbs and drugs over many years.
7 It is doubtful that the account related by Dioscorides refers to sugar made from sugar-cane. Mintz is also skeptical of R.J. Forbes’s view that the account by Dioscorides shows that sugar was produced during the first century (Sweetness and Power, p. 20).