

Constructing a Pharmacy: Herodotus and the Walls of Ecbatana

In his ekphrastic description of Ecbatana (I.98), Herodotus portrays the first five battlements of the city, which from the outermost to the innermost were painted white, black, crimson, blue, and orange (light red), as “*ἠνθισμένοι εἰσὶ φαρμάκοισι.*” While the use of *φαρμάκοισι* to mean pigmentation and color may simply refer to paints or dyes derived from plant material, I believe that this does not tell the whole tale. Herodotus’s choice to describe the colors by employing the term *φάρμακα* is unusual, and may imply that Herodotus is commenting on the nature of city itself. *Φαρμάκοισι* more broadly refers to medicinal, poisonous, or enchanting substances, and I argue that the colored walls of Ecbatana serve in this capacity. After examining the passage in which Herodotus describes Ecbatana, I will investigate the context for the city’s coloration and overall design as well as explore both archaeological and textual evidence from the Near East, particularly relating to the *ziggurat*. In the second portion of this paper, I turn to Plato in order to examine near-contemporary uses of the word *φάρμακον* in contexts that do not have an obvious meaning of “poison”, “medicine”, or “charm.” Finally, I synthesize this information, analyzing how Herodotus employs the color of the walls as the physical manifestation of the “poison” that is Ecbatana’s monarchial government. Herodotus’s description of Ecbatana’s embellishments not only reveal their color, but also provide a commentary on the noxious elements underlying the city.