



## Interpretations of the 5<sup>Th</sup> Grade (Ages 10-11) Turkish Students' Historical Knowledge Based on Historical Sources

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the ways how the 5th grade (ages 10-11) students interpret historical knowledge based on historical sources. To study this student were given a worksheet containing historical sources and an open-ended question based on the historical sources. The data of this study is collected through one of the answers provided to the question by 150 students in elementary school. The data has been categorized under themes which have been created after study of students answers and related literature. The analysis of data demonstrate that pupils can interpret historical knowledge in the sources. Also it has been found that most of the pupils were able to synthesis their prior knowledge and information in the historical sources presented to them and were able reach personal conclusion. Yet some of the students tend to copy the information as is written on the historical source or respond emotionally. This study supports the idea that 5th grade (ages 10-11) students can read historical written sources and acquire historical information. Also this study gives information to social studies teachers on what consider when they prepare historical task for elementary school. Keywords Teaching history, social studies education, elementary school students, primary sources, historical reading

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### 1. Introduction

One of the major elements of teaching history is historical thinking. The importance of historical thinking skills has been one of the most important 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills that the students are expected to acquire throughout their school years. Source questioning, causal reasoning and questioning various viewpoints are the most important activities in acquiring the historical thinking skills and they are big steps towards acquiring the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills as well. To have the students exercise towards such skills in their early years would help them think historically on the following levels and acquire the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills on the way. Therefore, in early school years, source questioning and historical reasoning exercises carry great importance may it be at the entry-level.

The historical thinking has been used as almost a synonym of the terms of historical reasoning and historical literacy. The meaning of these terms contains meta concepts such as historical importance, use of evidence, description of change and continuity, analysis of reasons and consequences, obtaining historical perspective

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(Seixas, 2006; Van Drie and Van Boxtel, 2008). The final aim of these concepts is that the students should acquire knowledge from historical sources, complement their prior knowledge with the new ones, compare multiple sources and be able to come up with a relevant interpretation after having evaluated the sources with critical reading. In historical literacy, the use of the skill of source questioning is beyond reading and responding to a text.

### **1.1. Theoretical Framework**

Since the process of teaching causal relations, perceiving changes and continuity, comparing the weaknesses and strengths of evidence, taking notes of similarities and differences, and in short, acquiring the understanding of historical thinking take a long period, it is the best to start the education as early as possible. In related studies (Rantala & Kahawaja, 2018; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014; VanSledright, 2002), it is pointed out that elementary school students can historical questioning as a result of long-term applications. This study is important in terms of presenting current data and examining it in a different country

In teaching history, there are difficulties related to the process of questioning based on historical sources. One of them is that the language used in historical sources is difficult for students at young ages. Another problem is that such texts tend to be very long. Even though it is risky to make some amendments in the language and length of the source texts, it is obligatory to make some amendments in the source text in order for the students to comprehend in the school environment (Reisman, 2012). It is possible to state that many researchers studying teaching history (Barton & Levstik, 2010; Rantala & Khawaja, 2018; VanSledright & Afflerbach, 2005) believe that the students can succeed in historical questioning if adjusted according to the age group. Also Harnett (1993) state that it is more convenient to using visual sources at this student level. In the studies concerning the use of evidence in the education of social studies, it has been proven that, in Turkey, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders (ages 10-14) in the elementary school can fictionalize past contextually depending on historical sources (Dilek, 2009), can support their explanations depending on multiple sources (Çulha Özbaşı, 2010; Kızılay & Doğan, 2014). On the other hand, Topçu and Kaya (2014), stated that social studies teachers in elementary school recognize that the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students suffer certain cognitive incompetency and certain issues concerning history seem too abstract for the students to grasp and they meet difficulties when teaching such subjects.

In Turkey, the subjects of history at the elementary school level (the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades) are included within the curriculum of the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade social studies course and the 8<sup>th</sup> grade course of Republic of Turkey Revolution History and Kemalism. In the education year of 2012-2013, 4+4+4 system has updated the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students (ages 10-11) as the elementary school level, and the teachers of social studies courses have started to teach the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students social studies course in the elementary school as well. In 2018, social studies curriculum in Turkey (for the primary and elementary schools the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> grades) have been updated (MEB, 2018). In the updated curriculum (MEB, 2018) defines that it is aimed that the students will “question historical evident of the different periods and places and determine the similarities and differences between the people, objects, events and cases and perceive change and continuity” From this point of view, although the phrase of historical thinking skills is not used directly in this curriculum but in the aim of the curriculum part seems to aimed to acquire students historical thinking skills through social studies curriculum. However, in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade social studies textbook (Şahin, 2018), there is no activity concerning to question a historical source within the subjects related to history. Therefore, the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students are inexperienced in reading 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> hand reading and interpreting historical sources.

In this context, this study provides the chance to reevaluate what to consider while determining the ways how the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students (ages 10-11) interpret historical sources and what to consider throughout the questioning depending on historical sources under the light of the field literature. Besides, the explanations and styles of how the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students interpret depending on the historical sources in the elementary school social studies class would provide the ones who prepare syllabi and course materials with valuable insight. In this study, only the answers given by the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in the social studies class of the elementary school after reading the historical sources in the exercise sheet (ANNEX 1) based on casual reasoning were analyzed. The data acquired have been discussed within the frame of the related literature.

## **2. Method**

This study is based on a qualitative research method and it is determined as a case study. A case study is a description and analysis of a limited system and the examination of an actual phenomenon in an actual context (Merriam, 2013). The data acquired during the research has been obtained through the examination of documents as a qualitative research technique. Document examination is the analysis of written material containing information related to phenomenon or phenomena that is aimed to be researched (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006). In this study, it is asked to answer the questions in the worksheet based on historical sources (Please see Appendix).

### **2.1. Participants**

The participants of the study consist of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students (ages 10-11) in 4 classes in a state elementary school in Turkey. It was thought suitable to conduct the research examining the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students (ages 10-11) to form an opinion on how they understand styles of interpreting depending on the evidence and historical thinking at an early age. Besides, the reason why this group has been chosen as participants is that at the time the research was conducted, the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students have just studied Hittites civilization which the study presents as the subject of historical sources in social studies lesson.

### **2.2. Data Sources**

In the study, the data has been collected through student's task performance containing two historical sources and source based questions in April of 2019. The historical sources include quotes from one primary and one secondary sources related to plague happened in the Hittite. In both texts, it was stated that the information was cited from Hittite texts (anal), and the citation of the source texts was provided (ANNEX 1) according to the objective of presenting historical sources (Reisman, 2012). Since the sources should be in a proper level with 5<sup>th</sup> grade students quotes from the sources selected accordingly. Also this sources were not long and they were readable, it was not needed to modify the texts. The historical sources presented to the students did not include conflicting views rather they support each other. The reason the Hittite period selected is that this era is included in the national social studies curriculum. However the plague that happened in this era doesn't take place neither in the social studies curriculum nor in the textbooks.

There are 4 open-ended questions on the student's task related to two historical sources in total. However, in this study, the data acquired from only one of those questions has been analyzed, which has been designed for concepts such as causal reasoning depending on historical sources, empathy according to the historical context, and historical thinking. The question was set as "What was the actual reason for the plague among Hittites? What do you think about that?" When creating the open-ended question on the worksheet were short and focused on a single subject as suggested by Rantala and Khawaja (2018). We aimed to allow the students to respond to the task in their typical environment. Therefore, the students had to answer 4 questions in a 40-minute period in their classroom settings. During the application, the social studies teacher of the students was present without interfering anything. The students were asked to spend 10 minutes on each question. In the application, it was observed that the students returned their worksheets within the given time. In the first section, after the worksheets were distributed, and the students have read the source texts, they expressed that they do not know about the plague. Some of the students who had heard about the plague started to talk about it but the dialogue was kept as short as possible. Upon that, the students were explained that "it was a disease that caused death of many people." Later, the other students in the other 3 classes were provided with the same explanation.

### **2.3. Data Analysis**

The data in this study were analyzed through content analysis technique within the qualitative research technique. In content analysis technique, the similar data are collected around specified concepts and themes (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2008). The worksheets that are completely empty and illegible due to handwriting were eliminated from the study and the remaining 150 worksheets were analyzed. The acquired data were categorized according to the studies in the literature of the field (Dutt-Doner, Cook-Cottone & Allen, 2007; Harris, Halvorsen, Aponte-Martinez, 2016) and the codes developed by the researchers depending on the student responses. The response of each student was coded according to the provided themes and sub-themes and shown on the frequency table. While coding, each response by each student was assigned to only one

code. If the statements in the source text were copied or if two or more than two reasons were listed, they were coded as “copy” category. However, the expressions written by students having transformed from the information contained in the historical source were coded in appropriate categories according to their meanings. In order to provide reliability among coders, all data were coded together with another expert in social studies. The reliability of the data coded by two distinct experts was calculated with the formula provided by Miles and Huberman (1994) and the percentage of agreement was determined as 90. The formula reliability = (Consensus/Consensus + Dissidence) X 100 was applied. In the process of analysis, this percentage is considered to be reliable as well.

### 3. Findings

In this section, the answers written on the worksheets by the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in response to the historical question based on historical sources and 4 themes were defined. These themes consist of sub-themes within themselves. The data coded according to the themes are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Description of themes for analysis of 5<sup>th</sup> grade student’s responses about questioning

Criteria	Sub-Criteria	N	%	Examples from students responses
<b>Copied</b>	The expressions in the historical source text are copied or two or more than two reasons are listed.	5	3	(App.1)
	One of the expressions in the source text is chosen and copied.	2	1	“Sacrifices offered to Mala (Euphrates) river were disregarded.”
		8	5	“The unjust murder of Young Tudhaliya”
		9	6	“The gods were ignored.”
		16	11	“The slaves brought by his father Suppiluliuma I carried the plague.”
<b>Logical reasoning</b>	<b>Correct</b> deduction depending on the information provided by the historical source.	24	16	It is possible that the slaves coming from Egypt carried the disease. I think, it is the new coming slaves. Probably the slaves If Mursili’s father had not brought those “slaves” to Hittite, then the plague did not happen. Because the slaves came from Egypt carried the plague. It started with the prisoners and then the disease was spread.. The disease must have been brought by the slaves. It is possible. The fact that the slaves carried the plague from Egypt to Anatolia. It may be because people were brought from abroad. Fleas coming from Mala River.
	<b>Incorrect</b> deduction depending on the knowledge contained in the historical source	10	7	Because they prayed for a plague. Because the Hittite gods sent the plague to Hittite king. Because the gods conspired with others.
	Correct deduction depending on the prior knowledge	18	12	The reason why the plague spread; I mean, if someone carries a disease it is possible that this plague happened to be.

				Because there were no hospitals and the science of medicine was not discovered. It is possible that a kind of germ procreated.
	Incorrect deduction depending on the prior knowledge	2	1	Because of the meteorological events. Because of the water.
<b>Emotional responses</b>	Injustice	17	11	I think, according to the reasons above, because of the reason why Young Tudhaliya was murdered, it must have been the punishment for the act. Because Suppiluliuma tormented Egyptians. Because his father tortured Egyptians. Because Suppiluliuma tormented Egyptians. Because of the bad deed they had done, people with plague came from Egypt. Because they argued with gods, it spread. Gods sent the plague from Egypt to punish. Because people were unjustly murdered.
	Hygiene	21	14	Perhaps, because some people did not live hygienically. Because they lived in a very dirty country. I think the real reason why the plague spread is that the administrators did not pay attention to the hygienes of the country.
<b>No reading comprehension</b>	I do not know	5	3	The text does not include that. There is no information about this. I could not find any information about this. I do not know; the text does not tell about it.
	I did not understand/ I have no idea	6	4	I did not understand. I have no idea.
	Irrelevant response	7	5	Perhaps they were attacked by another country. Alcoholic beverages, gambling. Hittites suffered such a disease because they could not protect their country and their goods.
Total		150	100	

### 3.1. Copied

The responses of 40 (27%) students were coded related to the theme of choosing only one or all of the causal expressions within the document. The number of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students coded in these criteria because they have copied only one or all of the expressions within the source text is 24 (16%) in total

### 3.2. Logical Reasoning

The total number of the student response under this category is determined as 54 students (%36) among the data retrieved from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students. The reasoning theme has been divided into sub-themes because the responses of the students differentiated as correct and incorrect within themselves. The student responses coded according to these sub-themes are presented in Table1.

#### 3.2.1. Reasoning and writing based on historical source

When the responses of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students are analyzed, it was seen that the students (16%) can write the reason for the plague correctly in their own words depending on the provided historical source. It was determined that the students can analyze the information in the historical source through their personal prior knowledge. The responses of 5<sup>th</sup> grade students show that they can combine their prior knowledge with newly attained knowledge.

#### 3.2.2. Correct deduction depending on the information provided by the historical sources

The student responses coded to this category are the expressions taken from the text but do not prove correct. The students have read 2 different historical sources throughout this research and responded to various

questions. It is thought that as a response to the expressions in the other historical source (App.1) "What have you done, oh Gods? You let the plague spread in Hatti and now everybody dies!" they write responses such as "Because they prayed for a plague." And, again, the reason might have been the anxiety of finding a correct answer and test (Brandmo, Bråten & Schewe, 2019) or their feeling the necessity of copying some part of the source text.

### 3.2.3. Deduction depending only on the prior knowledge

By their written expressions, it is understood that the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students deduce depending on their prior knowledge (12%) more than the historical source they read. The determinant of the student answers coded to this category is that there is no word or sentence in these answers depending on the historical source. This theme has been divided into sub-criteria because of the substrata has appeared under the theme of "correct deduction depending on prior knowledge.

Table 2. Justification depending on not the source text but prior knowledge and reasoning.

	Sub-criteria	n	%	Example
<b>Correct deduction depending on prior knowledge</b>	Plague-stricken people	2	11	First, someone got the disease then it spread everyone. The reason why the plague spread; I mean, if someone carries a disease it is possible that this plague happened to be.
	Animals spread	10	56	Fleas on animals. Perhaps rats. Animals spread it. Possibly they did not care for hygiene and rats.
	Main reason	2	11	A kind of microbe might have grown. Microbes.
	Economic reasons (Poverty, trade)	2	11	Perhaps international trade. Because they were not nurtured well enough.
	Migration	2	11	Migrations from other countries might have been the reason for the plague. I think someone got the disease in another country and then when that person came here, the plague spread.

When the answers of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students coded to this theme are analyzed, it is seen that the majority (56%) have expressed the reason as animals. On the other hand, it is intriguing that there are answers related to economic reasons.

### 3.2.4. Incorrect deduction depending on prior knowledge

There are 2 student answers (1%) coded to the theme of incorrect deduction depending on reasoning. It is possible that these students write their statements depending on their own life experiences or the news of diseases they hear from media such as television or family when they write "because of water" or meteorological events.

### 3.3. Student answers related to emotional response theme

An "emotional response" theme has been created depending on the answers of participant students and related answers (25%) are coded as such. Similar themes were created in another study (Harris et al., 2016; Jacobson et al., 2018) related to the student questioning the reliability of historical sources as well. However, when coding to emotional response category, two different facets were discovered. It was seen that some students have used expressions such as "injustice, misdeed, torture, punishment," and then such answers were coded to the criteria of "injustice." In student answers coded to this category, it was seen that the statements take place especially in the historical text as "The unjust murder of the Hittite prince" was cited by the students. Another important result is that the students emotionally respond to the concept of hygiene. In those

answers coded to this category the emphasis to that Hittites were not clean enough is widespread. It is possible that they deduced such information with the knowledge of that the diseases spread in unhealthy environments (Arnk, 1991). On the other hand, their answers reflect the judgment that in the past people were not clean.

### 3.4. Student responses related to insufficient reading

It is clear that statements such as "I do not understand/I do not know/I have no idea" are related to the concept of perceiving what one reads. Students who have met with the exercise of questioning historical sources for the first time might have written such answers. According to VanSledright and Afflerbach (2005), the insufficient skills of reading of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students, hinders them to interpret the main sources. Another option is, historical sources are not understandable for these students.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study consists of only one section of larger research conducted with the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in the elementary school. The 5<sup>th</sup> grade students were provided with 2 historical sources in their worksheets (App.1), and among a series of question-related to the historical sources, only the answers to one question ("What was the actual reason for the plague among Hittites? What do you think about that?") based on historical sources were analyzed in terms of their content.

One of the most important results of this study is that the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students have read the historical sources and question with the concern of finding a correct answer. It was determined that they have copied partial or complete parts of the historical source with the concern of finding and writing the correct answer. It is presumed that the students who do not know what to write have used this method as a means. In addition, it was observed that with the same concern they have written more than one correct answer depending on the historical sources. For example, one student is thought to show concerns of finding a correct answer because of her statement, "I do not know. Perhaps because of the bad things they had done. And, perhaps it is because the gods did not like them. And, perhaps the plague spread from the Egyptians. Everything is possible." In a study conducted by Brugar and Roberts (2018), it was determined that if students cannot find the correct answer within the text, they tend to write random words from the text, or depend only on their prior knowledge, or to give incorrect answers depending on the source. In this study, it was seen that the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students have a similar tendency. In studies conducted by Khawaja (2018) and Seixas (2006) Wineburg (2001), it was stated that the students are more focused on the knowledge included in the sources. However, the aim of the teaching history depending on the questioning of sources is that the students should learn the skill of deep thinking instead of finding one correct answer.

It was surprising to receive answers such as "I do not know, I did not understand, I have no idea." It is clear that the students read the source text in order to find a correct. Although the possibility of that the students were unwilling to write an answer when they respond as I do not know/I did not understand/I have no idea; however, according to the observations made during the application, that is a weak possibility. Because it was observed that the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students strived selflessly to be able to answer to the questions. According to the research results of ABIDE project (<http1>) conducted by The Ministry of National Education (MEB), the PISA results (Bozkurt, 2016) in Turkey are low because of the insufficient level of understanding of the texts among elementary school students. In this study, even the ratio is low, the difficulty of understanding the texts are observed, as well. It is thought that this situation is related to the concerns of finding a correct answer mainly as a result of the multiple-choice exams. It is a well-known fact that in the assessment and evaluation activities teachers do not choose open-ended questions for the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students. All teachers teaching the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students choose question types such as true-false, matching, filling the blanks in the evaluation exams (Aytaçlı and Gündoğdu, 2018).

With the answers of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students, it was understood that this age groups are capable of a relatively interpret document based questions. Also the ratio of the correct deduction depending on the historical source texts is generally high percentage. This situation is important as it shows that the students at the age group of 10-11 can transfer knowledge instead of copying the information in the historical source. At least some of the students could use their own words to explain the following sentence in the source text. The researchers (Barton, 1994; Rantala & Khawaja, 2018; VanSledright, 2002) suggest that in terms of the skill of historical

thinking, 11-year-old students can be motivated to question sources and historical production with a long studying period.

It is also observed that the students can come up with interpretations depending on their prior knowledge and they can express them in their own words. As the table above shows, in the answers of 2 students, instead of the word “slave,” “prisoners” and “captives” expressions were preferred, and it is understood that they suffer misconceptions. Depending on their own life experiences they show microbes as the result of the plague and they emphasize the impacts of poverty and malnutrition on such a disease is also an interesting result. 2 students stated that the plague may have spread from water and weather events.

Interestingly, however, none of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students wrote a statement that questioned the accuracy and reliability of the information in the source text. In this example, there is no debate as to whether Mursili's father really brought prisoners from Egypt or whether these prisoners were sick. This shows that the students accept the information in the source text without question. It was found in the study conducted by Yeşilbursa (2015) that elementary school students rely on authoritative sources. For this reason, even the students who deduced correct answers accepted the “plague prisoners” part without questioning the correct information based on the information in the source. In fact, it would be an unreasonable expectation that students would question the reliability of historical sources at such an early age (VanSledright & Afflerbach, 2005).

In addition, as seen in Table 1, it is seen that the students judge Hittites, especially about hygiene. Based on the answers of these students, it is seen that they could not think in accordance with the historical context. Therefore, it can be said that they are at the beginning level in terms of the historical empathy levels indicated by Lee and Ashby (2001). Although there is no problem in reading skills, the students do not think of contextualization appropriately and fall into presentism/[anachronism](#) error. For this reason, they should carry out systematic and continuous historical source-based activity practices under teacher guidance.

Also when evaluated in terms of language, students probably used the phrase “I think” in general in their answers because the phrase “do you think” appears at the root of the question. In addition, it is understood that the students use the word “probably” a lot in their answers, and because they do not have the correct information, it is understood that the students express it in this way to show that they somehow predict the real reason. In general, the fact that the students write short answers is also one of the issues identified in this research.

In this study, there are some basic limitations. The first is that although the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students (10-11 years) know the Hittites in the source text presented in the data collection tool in the social studies course, a historical text related to the “plague” which they did not see directly in the course is presented. Secondly, without any preliminary work, the students had to read and respond to historical sources. Thirdly, the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students did not study about questioning historical sources in social studies courses.

As a result, this study is an indication that the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in the elementary school can reason and interpret based on historical sources and transfer knowledge. Moreover, this study demonstrated that students in these ages can respond to written sources as well as visual sources. Secondly, there is data showing that the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students are anxious to find and give a single correct answer in the source texts. The fact that the students encounter multiple-choice questions at this grade level can be considered as a reason for this situation. Thirdly; in this study, it was found that some of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students gave emotional responses to the source and did not think exactly in accordance with the historical context, and were at the beginning level in terms of establishing historical empathy. It can be said that students mix historical empathy and sympathy concepts at the 5<sup>th</sup> grade level.

It has been concluded that the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students are ready for the activities to gain historical thinking skills and that activities can be conducted at the basic level in order to derive meaning based on sources questioning. In the end, it will be important to have the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students experience long-term historical source questioning and activity-based and questionable conflicting historical sources. In the future research can be designed experimental study by researchers with social studies teachers in order to improve 5<sup>th</sup> grade students historical thinking capabilities.



## Appendix. Source information provided for the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students.

### Source A

*It is known that the following expressions are mentioned in the plague prayers made to the gods in the Hittite texts.*

“Oh gods, what have you done? You let the plague enter Hatti and everyone is dying! Now, there is no one left to prepare food and drink! Nobody sows and harvests the fields of the gods because all the planters and harvesters are dead! All the miller women who make bread for the gods are dead! Since all the cattle and sheep shepherds are dead, the sheep and cattle pens, which the sheep and cattle were selected for sacrifice are empty!”

Source: Reyhan, E. (2009). The Revenues of Hittite state, storage and. *Akademik Bakış*, 2(4), p. 157-174.

### Source B

The plague prayers written during the period of Mursili II, the Hittite king (1339-1306 BC) include the following as the causes of this plague epidemic:

The gods were neglected,

The unjust murder of young Tudhaliya (Hittite prince),

Sacrifices offered to Mala (Euphrates) river were disregarded,

The slaves brought by his father Suppiluliuma I carried the plague

Source: Ünal, A. (1980). Hitit tıbbının ana hatları, *Belleten*, 44 (175), p. 475-496, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları

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