This is an excerpt from the CESTA Research Anthology 2022. To read the full Anthology, click here. To learn more about CESTA’s Anthology series and read editions from previous years, click here.
Much of ancient Greek and Latin literature survives piecemeal—in small soundbites that later authors who had some access to the original work quoted in their own writings. For example, one of the initial verses of an epic poem called the Annales by the 2nd-century Latin poet Quintus Ennius (c.239–169 BCE)—“Musae quae pedibus magnus pulsatis Olympum” (“Muses, you who beat great Olympus with your feet”)—comes to us thanks to Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BCE), who quotes the verse in a section of his treatise On the Latin Language (7.20) where he is discussing toponyms: “Olympus”, he argues, “is the name which the Greeks give to the sky, and which everyone calls a mountain in Macedonia...”. Our project aimed to digitally track and classify how, where, when, and why Ennius’ poetry had been transmitted over the centuries, in a way that would improve upon existing means of capturing these relationships.

My research intern, Antony Bui, and I created a spreadsheet that first noted the Ennian verse and the later source who cited it. We then tried to capture the principal interest of the citing source: lexicological, antiquarian, scientific, literary, etc. We then asked what was the “trigger” that motivated the citation—what was it about the Ennian verse that caused a later source to quote it? Finally, we converted this verbal description of the trigger into a repeatable formula: did the quoted line “illustrate”, “corroborate”, or “augment” a point the quoting source intended to make; or did it “pose” a question he wanted to ask; or did it offer a “contrast” to his own view?

In future, we hope to extend this analysis to many other ancient literary corpora, to better understand and document the relationships between ancient intellectuals over the centuries.
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