

Mapping Cicero's Letters: Digital Visualisations in the Liberal Arts Classroom^{*1}

Introduction

Mapping Ancient Texts (hereafter: MAT) is an ongoing digital-visualisation project undertaken by a team at Kenyon College consisting of a Classics faculty member, instructional technologists, and undergraduate students.² MAT's goal is to create digital visualisations of ancient Mediterranean travel narratives, and to investigate these travel narratives as reflections of the geospatial and travel-related conceptions of ancient authors and audiences. MAT's visualisations have applications for teaching and research. This paper focuses on the pedagogical dimension of the project. All the visualisations discussed here are available on the project website.³

Background

My interest in digital visualisations of the ancient world stems from broader research into the rhetoric and representation of travel and geographical space in Latin literature.⁴ Roman imperialism both made possible and depended upon networks of trade, trafficking, travel, and transport that traversed the Mediterranean basin and beyond.⁵ My other research, along with MAT, is inspired more broadly by the so-called 'spatial turn'

* The video of the talk, presented at the online conference *Teaching Classics in the Digital Age* on June 15-16, 2020, is available at <https://doi.org/10.5446/51979>.

1 I would like to give special thanks to Joseph M. Murphy for his contributions to the technical discussion in this paper. Any errors that remain are my responsibility alone. I am also grateful to the editors of this publication for the opportunity to contribute.

2 Current and former team members are: Micah Myers, Kenyon College Department of Classics (PI); Joseph M. Murphy, Director, Kenyon College Center for Innovative Pedagogy; Alex Alderman, Instructional Technologist, Kenyon College Center for Innovative Pedagogy; and undergraduate researchers Natalie Ayers, Haley Gabrielle, and Daniel Olivieri. MAT has received support from Kenyon College's Center for Innovative Pedagogy and Department of Classics, the Great Lakes College Association, and the Five Colleges of Ohio CODEX Initiative. Although both 'digital visualisation' and 'digital map' appropriately describe what we create in this project, we prefer 'digital visualisation' since it encompasses a broader spectrum of types of images.

3 <http://mappingancienttexts.net> (last accessed March 29, 2021).

4 Myers 2011, 2018, 2019; Myers, Zimmerman Damer forthcoming.

5 For globalised perspectives of the Roman world, see esp. Hingley 2005; Pitts, Versluys 2015; Loar, MacDonald, Padilla Peratta 2018, scholarship that builds on fundamental work by Horden, Purcell 2000; Morris 2003. For network analysis of the ancient Mediterranean, see Malkin 2003; Malkin, Constantakopoulou, Panagopoulou 2009.

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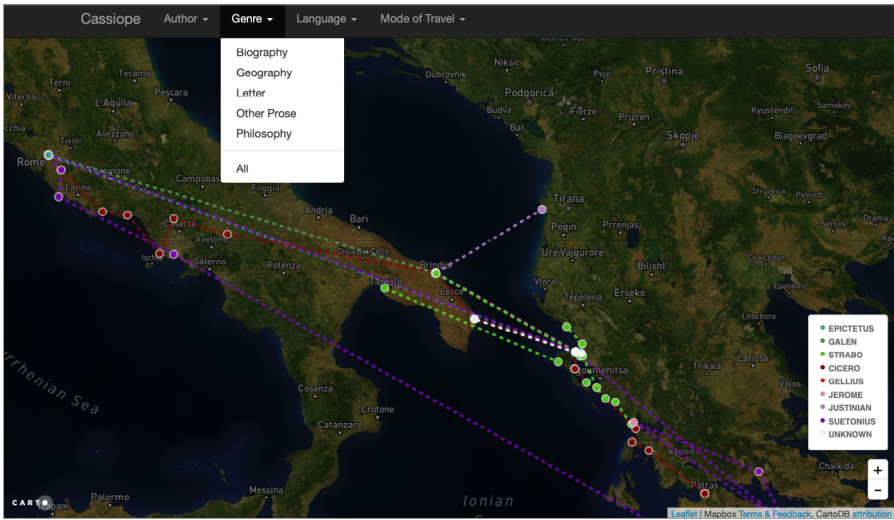


Fig.1: Screenshot of MAT visualisation of all travel narratives mentioning the port of Cassiope. The user interface allows filtering by author, genre, language, and mode of travel.

and ‘mobility turn’ that have occurred across cultural studies. The spatial turn analyses space not as an objective, inert dimension in which activity occurs, but as socially and politically constructed, and as an important factor in the shaping of individuals and societies. The mobility turn emphasises movement (and sedentariness) of humans and things in the places and spaces that the spatial turn brings to the forefront.⁶

These are exciting times to be asking questions about ancient Mediterranean geography and travel. The publication in 2000 of the *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World* brought a new level of precision to our understanding of where things were in the ancient world.⁷ The *Barrington Atlas* has provided a foundation for a variety of digital projects, including the *Ancient World Mapping Center*,⁸ *Pleiades*,⁹ the *Pelagios Network*,¹⁰ the *Digital Atlas of Roman and Medieval Civilizations*,¹¹ *Orbis: The Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World*,¹² *Mapping Greek Lyric*,¹³ and *Topos Text*.¹⁴ MAT builds upon these other projects, with the goal of creating geospatial digital

6 Spatial turn: Lefebvre 1991 [1974]; Bourdieu 1977; Tuan 1978; Soja 1989, 1996; Hubbard, Kitchin, Valentine 2004. Mobility turn: Hannam, Sheller, Urry 2006; Sheller, Urry 2006; Cresswell 2011.

7 Talbert 2000.

8 <https://awmc.unc.edu/wordpress/> (last accessed March 29, 2021).

9 <https://pleiades.stoa.org> (last accessed March 29, 2021).

10 <https://pelagios.org> (last accessed March 29, 2021).

11 <https://darmc.harvard.edu> (last accessed March 29, 2021).

12 <https://orbis.stanford.edu> (last accessed March 29, 2021).

13 <http://lyricmappingproject.stanford.edu/bubblemap.html> (last accessed March 29, 2021).

14 <https://topostext.org> (last accessed March 29, 2021).

interfaces capable of visualising multiple travel narratives simultaneously. I emphasise the ‘travel’ in ‘travel narrative’, since one thing that distinguishes our project is the manner in which it visualises not just places, but also movement between places.

Our first visualisation for MAT charted all references in classical literature to the port of Cassiope on the Ionian island of Corcyra, modern Corfu (Fig. 1). The visualisation allows users to view and read multiple travel narratives mapped onto the places that the narratives describe. Users can also filter the data in the visualisation based on criteria such as language, author, or, as seen in Figure 1, genre. The Cassiope visualisation provided a proof of concept using a limited data set. This paper looks at pedagogical applications of the sort of digital visualisation and digital cartography that we used in the prototype. I shall focus primarily on the results from a course at Kenyon College in which students use the web application *Carto* to create visualisations from geospatial information in Cicero’s letters. This paper explores how these projects can teach important technical skills as part of a classics course, and engage students in detailed analysis of Roman mobility and history. I also discuss some challenges we have faced in using evolving technologies in an undergraduate classroom setting at a liberal arts college.

Mapping Cicero’s Letters: methods

The *Mapping Cicero’s Letters* project approaches Cicero’s epistolary correspondences as travel texts in so far as they move – or purport to move – from author to addressee, and frequently make reference to journeys that Cicero and his correspondents undertook.¹⁵ The data for *Mapping Cicero’s Letters* is created by Kenyon College students enrolled in a course on ancient travel, geography, and ethnography. We have run the project three times: in 2016, 2018, and 2020. I co-teach the project with Joseph Murphy, Director of the Kenyon College Center for Innovative Pedagogy. It is the only digital project that the students undertake in the course, although they are introduced to other digital resources over the course of the term. The course has no prerequisites; all readings are in English. Students range from first-years who have never previously taken a classics course to senior classics majors. The students are not expected to have any technical background, and most do not. In 2016, 16 students took part in the project. We capped the course at that number to make conducting this project for the first time more manageable. In 2018, 24 students participated. In 2020, the course size was again capped, this time because the class was taught as a three-hour seminar; 17 students took part. In 2020 the project was conducted remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The end goal of *Mapping Cicero’s Letters* is to have students, working in groups of two, create original tabular datasets and digital visualisations based on the geospa-

¹⁵ Rossi 2011 offers a comprehensive study of travel in Cicero’s letters.

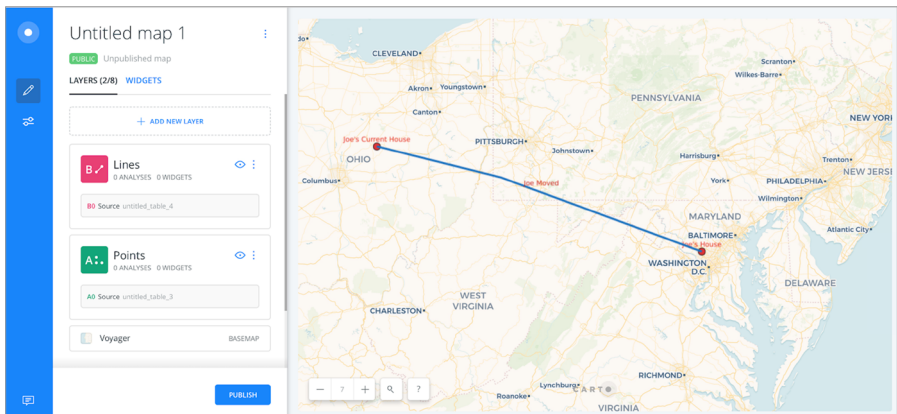


Fig. 2: Example of introductory exercise in which students create a visualisation of their journey from home to Kenyon College using *Carto*.

tial information in epistles from the corpus of Cicero’s letters, and to contribute to a collective dataset. The project’s primary learning aims are increased student facility with: (1) tabular data; (2) data visualisation; (3) ancient Mediterranean geography and travel; and (4) late Republican Roman history. In 2016 and 2018 we moved from our normal classroom to a computer lab for this project; there we conducted a mix of instructional tutorials to teach the skills required to complete the project and in-class independent project time, during which students worked on data creation and visualisation while we were available to answer questions. In 2020 we used a mix of remote synchronous and asynchronous instruction, as well as independent work time and drop-in virtual office hours to substitute for the in-class time that we would have devoted to the project. To complete the project, students learn and make use of a variety of skills, ranging from traditional close reading of texts to the database-management language SQL.

At the beginning of the project, students are paired off into groups of two.¹⁶ Next they are introduced to *Carto*, a GIS-based web mapping application that offers free academic accounts.¹⁷ *Carto* has a fairly easy learning curve and offers a variety of useful features for styling and customising visualisations. After the students sign up for *Carto* accounts, we familiarise them with the platform and with broader concepts about digital maps. Through a hands-on activity in which the students map their own journeys from home to college, we introduce the concept of map layers, in this case a points layer and a lines layer. In this activity, students create two points for their visualisation: one

16 An odd number of students in the 2020 iteration of the project necessitated a group of three as well. Documentation and video tutorials covering everything discussed in this section in greater detail are available at <http://mappingancienttexts.net/category/documentation/> (last accessed March 29, 2021).

17 <https://carto.com> (last accessed March 29, 2021).

representing where they consider home, one for the location of Kenyon College. They then create a line, what we term a 'journey segment', linking the two. The resulting visualisation represents their journey from home to Kenyon (Fig. 2). They also learn about the relationship between a layer and its underlying datasets, and how points, lines, and polygons function on a map in *Carto*. Students also learn to use *Carto's* CSS interface, which allows them to customise the appearance of their visualisation, including changing the size and colour of elements and labeling points and lines.

Having learned about Cicero earlier in the course, students are now introduced to his letters. Each group of two is assigned a set of 20 letters, from either *ad Familiares* or *ad Atticum*, for their visualisations.¹⁸ Groups then read their assigned letters, and attempt to identify information about the locations of the author and recipient. The former is often supplied by the letter header or at its conclusion. The location of the recipient can be more challenging to ascertain. In addition to analysing the contents of the letters to identify the location of the recipient, students often consult D. R. Shackleton Bailey's commentaries.¹⁹ For this step, students frequently get help from the instructors or a fellow student who knows Latin and is familiar with using a commentary. Students are also asked to make note of any references to travel within their letters. Once students have identified the locations of the authors and recipients of their letters, they use the Pleiades gazetteer to find the coordinates and the Pleiades URI for each location.

The students next begin the process of transforming the information gleaned from the letters into tabular data in Excel following templates that we provide. As in the visualisation created in the introductory exercise, their visualisations of the letters have two layers, a points layer and a journey-segments layer, so they initially create two separate data files. The points-layer file includes columns with the name of the location of the author or recipient, evidence for the location, the name of the person associated with that point, the name of the letter, the composition date, and any relevant passage relating to travel (Fig. 3).²⁰ Each letter is therefore represented as two points in two rows of data: one point for the author and a second for the recipient. The format of the journey-segments file is similar. Each letter has one journey segment corresponding to the two points where the author and recipient are (e.g. 'Rome to Mutina'). Instead of geographical coordinates, each segment is given two unique location IDs, which students use later to link the two points associated with each letter (Fig. 4).

18 Students have been assigned different letters during each iteration. So far, students have collectively covered *ad Familiares* 1-390 and *ad Atticum* 20-132.

19 Shackleton Bailey 1965-70, 1977. There are instances in which the location cannot be ascertained or done so with certainty. This uncertainty can be indicated in the notes column of their data.

20 Dates are represented as a single date as well as a *terminus ante quem* and *terminus post quem*. This system allows us to make use of the time-filtering torque feature in *Carto* and to reflect the different specificity for the dates of Cicero's letters, which varies from as precise as, e.g. the morning of a certain day to as vague as, e.g. a season of a year. There are well-known uncertainties relating to the dates of some letters. See esp. Shackleton Bailey 1977, 24; White 2010, 74-75 with 202 n. 52. For the larger questions relating to approaching Cicero's letters chronologically, see Beard 2002; Gibson 2012, 2013; McCutcheon 2016.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	
1	Point	Reference for location	Places URL	ID Number	Latitude	Longitude	Author/Recipient	Citation (SB)	Citation (Vulg)	Language	Genre	Composition Date	Terminus post quem	Terminus ante quem	Travel References
2	Tostarcum	Wester	https://places.ahaz.org/place/421028	S2020	41.79436	12.71819	A. Cicero	281 VI.25	Latin	Letter	Letter	24 August 49 BC	0046-8-31 BC	0046-8-24 BC	
3	Rome	Letter 280	https://places.ahaz.org/place/420225	S2021	41.89179	12.88197	R. N. Pagan Gellus	381 VI.25	Latin	Letter	Letter	24 August 49 BC	0046-8-31 BC	0046-8-24 BC	
4	Antura	Wester	https://places.ahaz.org/place/420723	S2003	41.49865	12.75622	A. Cicero	302 VI.19	Latin	Letter	Letter	28 August 45 BC	0046-8-28 BC	0046-8-28 BC	↑ always thought his Paeninus slope

Fig. 3: Sample 'Points' file.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
Journey Segment	Starting Location	Final Location	Location ID	Author	Citation (SB)	Citation (Vulg)	Language	Genre	Composition Date	Terminus post quem for w/c	Terminus ante quem for work	Notes
Rome to Rome	S201	S202	Cicero	Cicero	221 VI.22	Latin	Letter	Letter	May 48 BCE	0046-6-1 BC	0046-6-31 BC	Domitius has return
Rome to Corduba	S203	S204	Cicero	Cicero	222 VI.10b	Latin	Letter	Letter	September 48 BCE	0046-9-1 BC	0046-9-30 BC	
Rome to Corduba	S206	S206	Cicero	Cicero	222 VI.10a	Latin	Letter	Letter	September 48 BCE	0046-9-1 BC	0046-9-30 BC	
Rome to Corduba	S207	S208	Cicero	Cicero	224 VI.11	Latin	Letter	Letter	June 45 BCE	0046-6-1 BC	0046-6-30 BC	↑ now that your high!
Rome to Rome	S209	S2010	Cicero	Cicero	225 IV.13	Latin	Letter	Letter	August 46 BCE	0046-8-1 BC	0046-8-31 BC	↑ I lack not only many
Rome to Thessalonica	S2011	S2012	Cicero	Cicero	226 VI.12	Latin	Letter	Letter	October 46 BCE	0046-10-31 BC	0046-10-31 BC	
Rome to Hadrumetum	S2013	S2014	Cicero	Cicero	227 VI.13	Latin	Letter	Letter	September 46 BCE	0046-9-1 BC	0046-9-30 BC	↑ I have begun to enter
Rome to Hadrumetum	S2015	S2016	Cicero	Cicero	228 VI.14	Latin	Letter	Letter	26 November 46 BCE	0046-11-26 BC	0046-11-26 BC	
Rome to Mytilene	S2017	S2018	Cicero	Cicero	229 IV.8	Latin	Letter	Letter	August 46 BCE	0046-8-1 BC	0046-8-31 BC	
Rome to Mytilene	S2019	S2020	Cicero	Cicero	230 IV.7	Latin	Letter	Letter	September 46 BCE	0046-9-1 BC	0046-9-30 BC	Marcellus is being for

Fig. 4: Sample 'Journey Segments' file.

Students next import their tabular data into *Carto*, where the data requires customisation and manipulation through the application of SQL statements. In the students' data, every reference to Rome, for example, has the exact same geographical coordinates. *Carto* renders multiple points with the same coordinates as if they were a single point. To address this issue and to connect their points with journey segments, students learn to apply two SQL statements. The first one scatters identical points so that they no longer overlap, but continue to be in the general vicinity of the location to which they refer. Applying a second SQL statement links scattered points with their corresponding journey segments by using the unique location IDs mentioned above. Applying the second SQL statement also requires the students to create two additional tabular-data files drawn from the original two. Students are also encouraged to use *Carto's* CSS interface to customise the appearance of their visualisations.

At the conclusion of the project each student group presents their visualisations in class. As part of their presentations, they are also required to have researched two places mentioned in their assigned letters, and to offer an in-depth analysis of one letter. Groups also contribute their data to a combined dataset, which allows us to create visualisations of the entire class's data. Examples of these collective visualisations are available on the project website, including visualisations that use *Carto's* cluster feature to show the frequency that places are mentioned and *Carto's* torque feature, where the points appear and disappear to reflect the chronology of the letters.

Mapping Cicero's Letters: results and discussion

In both the 2016 and 2018 versions of the project, all groups succeeded in creating visualisations, with quality ranging from exemplary to marginal. In 2020, because the project was taught remotely, each member of a group was responsible for creating a visualisation of half of the assigned letters. One student did not complete the project. On the exemplary end of student performance, some students discovered additional *Carto*

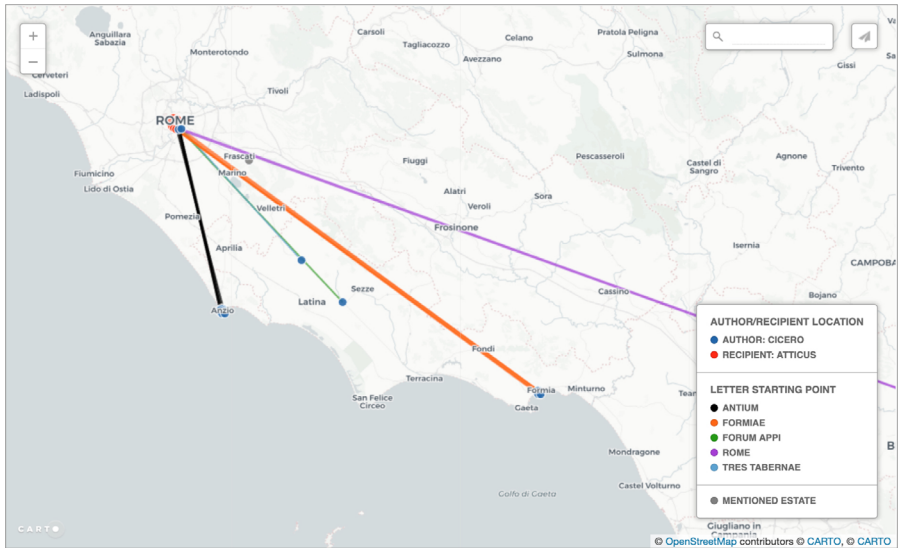


Fig. 5: Student-created visualisation of selection from Cicero's Letters to Atticus. Credit: Sean Deryck and Kate Zibas.

features on their own, for instance how to label and colour-code journey segments (Fig. 5). On the other side of the spectrum, some maps had obvious errors, such as points that were geo-referenced incorrectly to places outside the Roman world. Nonetheless, all the students but one created visualisations, which was a minimum threshold for passing the assignment. Moreover, all students overcame various obstacles to get their data visualised, demonstrating resilience and problem-solving skills. This section of the paper will discuss some of the factors that we suspect affected student performance. Carrying out this project has taught us about some of the challenges and benefits of conducting digital projects in a college classroom. I hope that these reflections are applicable not only to our specific project, but also to other digital-visualisation projects undertaken in pedagogical contexts in classics and beyond.

a) The platform

We chose *Carto* while the project team was attending a digital humanities workshop in 2015. This workshop allowed us to make rapid prototypes, comparing options that included *Carto*, *Neatline*, *ArcGIS*, and *ArcGIS StoryMaps*. In the time allotted, we had the most success working with *Carto*, and chose that platform. For pedagogical purposes, a web-based system like *Carto* also has advantages over locally installed software, since students are more able to work on their own computers or in computer labs across campus. At a virtual workshop in the summer of 2020, we began reappraising digital visualisation options. We had some success creating network charts in *Flou-*

rish,²¹ which we may use in future iterations of the project to complement the visualisations that we create in *Carto*.²²

Relying on *Carto*, as with any third-party-hosted software solution, requires flexibility, however. For example, *Carto* released a significant redesign prior to the 2018 iteration of the project. This redesign forced us to rewrite almost all of our documentation on short notice. In addition, *Carto*, like many apps, has bugs that occasionally present issues. A few student groups have dealt with bugs during the project. Our experience with *Carto*'s redesign and its bugs speaks to a fundamental challenge in combining classics with the digital: we work in a discipline in which change has typically been slow and deliberate; digital platforms evolve quickly and are frequently released in beta versions. Making use of them often requires dexterity and adaptability.

b) From one computer to many

Another related issue is the challenges that arise when students attempt to recreate on many different machines workflows that function successfully for us on a handful of computers in our research group. We anticipated that this could be an issue, so we attempted to create a consistent computing environment by giving students access to known machines in a computer lab. Students nonetheless have run into a variety of issues. Some issues arise from students choosing to use their own computers, or Google Sheets rather than Excel. Other issues stem from corrupted files or aforementioned bugs in *Carto*. Even small things like SQL reading quotation marks on Apple computers differently than on Windows-based PCs are larger issues at the class scale than they are at the research-group level. In some cases students actually discover methods that are successful when they do things their own way. Our workflow review in 2018 did not notice new integrations between *Carto*, *Dropbox*, and *Office 365*. Enterprising students discovered these connections, which proved to be quite elegant solutions. For example, the *Dropbox* and *Office 365* integrations allow students to edit the Excel sheets online instead of making local copies as we suggest. The *Carto-Dropbox* integration also permits students to link their *Carto* accounts to *Dropbox* files instead of uploading them separately. There are instances, however, where students using these integrations have run into trouble, and we have initially been at a disadvantage providing support.

The workflow that we provide students to guide them through creating their visualisations draws heavily on internal documentation produced in the MAT research group. At points during each iteration of the project, we have discovered 'expert blind spots' where the documentation assumes higher levels of knowledge about classics

²¹ <https://flourish.studio> (last accessed March 29, 2021).

²² Marley 2018 has done extensive work on social networks in Cicero's texts. See also Marley's visualisations on the Digital Cicero website: <http://bam.lib.uiowa.edu/digitalcicero/> (last accessed March 29, 2021).

or *Carto* than is appropriate. This issue is one of the common pitfalls of translating workflows from a research-group setting to the classroom environment. We have resolved some of these while producing the workflow handouts; others have only been recognised when students interpret the documentation in creative but incorrect ways. Streamlining our documentation to reduce opportunities for unproductive error is an ongoing project.

c) SQL

As mentioned above, once the students upload their data into *Carto*, they are required to transform it with SQL statements that scatter the points so that all references to a given location are visible, and create lines that connect the points. We give students template code and instructions to change particular variables in order to accomplish this task. Our goal here is quite modest: we simply wish students to get a little experience tweaking code to make specific datasets work. In future iterations of the project, we would like to explain a little more of the grammar of SQL to give students a better sense of how the code functions. Equipping the students with better understanding would help them troubleshoot their own code. General troubleshooting in SQL and beyond and productive error reporting are technical skills we are considering teaching more intentionally in this project.

d) Group work

The team aspect of this project also presents in particular ways in relation to the platform and the technical skills required. In the early stages, as students research and analyse Cicero's letters, working in teams of two functions well. Every student has a partner on both research and technical questions, and we observe good collaborative activity during class sessions. Once the datasets are uploaded into *Carto*, however, we have noted many teams working with one person's hands on the keyboard and the other team member watching. Sometimes this person is actively engaged with error-checking and problem-solving. In other instances they appear less involved. Since the students give a joint presentation as the culmination of the project, they are incentivised not to disengage entirely. We do, nonetheless, have concerns whether the learning experiences are equivalent. Free-rider problems are endemic to group work, although the individualised account structure in *Carto* may make them more likely in this project.

Overall, we have deemed this project a success, and we plan to continue it with a new set of Cicero's letters when the course is next taught. Students are introduced to aspects of the classical world – from Cicero to letter writing to Mediterranean geography – in a new way. In addition, they either improve upon existing technical skills or, more often, develop new ones.

Conclusion

In the *Mapping Cicero's Letters* project, our goals are the introduction and improvement of fundamental skills. Some are traditional skills like close reading, interpretation, and analysis. Others are newer, such as working with tabular data, digital visualisation, CSS, and SQL. It is our intention that all of these skills might become foundations for more complex research in the future. Yet putting aside the technological details that this paper has outlined, projects like these require students to spend a great deal of time thinking about, and thinking with, the geography of the ancient Mediterranean. And so they offer a particularly active way to promote learning about the spaces in which the discipline of classics works.

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