



THE GREATEST ATLAS EVER PRODUCED?

Joan Blaeu's *Atlas Maior* is one of history's finest cartographic works. To celebrate the publication of a new edition, **Christian Amodeo** introduces a selection of its sumptuous colour plates

Although map collectors had long been binding loose maps, the world's first atlas wasn't published until 1570. Flemish scholar and geographer Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (Theatre of the world) contained 53 maps and was an enormous success. At last, scholars could hold the whole world – or at least the known world – in their hands. By the late 16th century, however, atlases were reduced to compact books in order to reach a broader market.

From about 1630, Amsterdam-based Joan Blaeu and Johannes Janssonius resurrected world atlas publishing and battled one another for control of the growing lucrative market. Competition led the pair to push cartographic boundaries (often quite literally, as knowledge of the globe was still expanding). They produced sumptuously ornamented atlases of up to 450 maps and published them in up to four languages: Latin, German, Dutch and French.

But in 1662–65, Blaeu broke the mould with

Above: 'New and very accurate map of the whole world by Joan Blaeu';
Right: 'Geographia blaviana', one of 21 elaborate illustrations that decorated the atlas's 11 volumes



the finest and most comprehensive baroque atlas, his *Atlas Maior*, which spanned the Arctic, Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas. Its publication put Blaeu ahead of his competitor and firmly on the map as the world's premier atlas publisher. (Janssonius also published an *Atlas Maior*, but it was considered less consistent than Blaeu's.)

The first edition, in Latin, contains 594 maps, 21 frontispieces and illustrations, and 3,368 pages of text over 11 volumes. It was the most expensive book on the market in the 17th century, selling for the modern equivalent of around £15,000, a little less if you didn't want the maps hand coloured.

But for even this price, you weren't buying all new work – far from it. Neither Blaeu nor Janssonius had ever surveyed a piece of land or drawn a map, but then, living in a major cultural hub such as Amsterdam, they didn't need to. The information was bought or 'borrowed' from earlier maps and atlases. Blaeu drew heavily on the *Theatrum orbis terrarum* and made frequent use of Gerard Mercator's *Atlas*. Often an original manuscript was bought from the scholar who mapped a territory.

"From a scientific viewpoint, Blaeu's *Atlas Maior*

may not be as good as it looks," says Peter van der Krogt of the University of Utrecht, the leading expert on Dutch atlases. "Of course, the maps are beautifully engraved and the printing is fine, but the contents of the maps could be much better. To make his atlas as large as possible, Blaeu included every map that he could lay his hands on."

Yet every single map in the *Atlas Maior* was published by Blaeu or his father, Willem Jansz. On the maps themselves, the title and dedication were usually in Latin, as were the names of the regions, seas and major rivers. Other names were usually given in the local language, and sometimes in more than one language near linguistic borders.

As well as Latin, the *Atlas Maior* was published in French, Spanish, Dutch and German editions, although the last two were largely expanded versions of his earlier atlases for those countries. The different editions differed in the order and number of maps and the number of volumes. For example, in the 1664 French edition, more space was devoted to descriptions of France.

From 1637, Blaeu's firm owned the world's largest printing press, with nine presses for books





and six for copper plates, but in 1667 it opened a second press, where most of the atlas's maps were probably printed. Unfortunately, this burnt down in 1672, and numerous map plates were lost.


We don't know what Blaeu's print-runs were, but it's estimated that in total he published 650 Latin, 400 French, 300 Dutch and 200 Spanish editions. Only six German editions are known to have existed. A survey in 1993 of 2,500 mainly Western European libraries turned up 317 existing copies, mostly of the Latin edition.

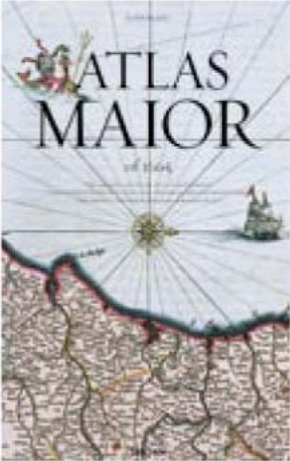
The four editions of the *Atlas Maior* were in production for 15 years. It's estimated that a single page took eight hours to compose, so five typesetters would have had to work for six years to complete the 12,500 or so pages of full text. But this is just a small part of the incredible workforce that must have been involved in the atlas's production. "Just imagine how many people earned their living in the engraving, printing, colouring, binding and selling of thousands of maps and hundreds of atlas volumes," says van der Krogt. As he writes in the introduction to Taschen's new edition, "the production, printing and binding of the

Clockwise from left: Jan Mayen, a desolate volcanic island that lies 600 kilometres north of Iceland and was named after a Dutch whaling captain in the early 17th century; William Blaeu's map of Asia was new at the time the *Atlas Maior* was published; 'Britain, as it was divided at the time of the Anglo-Saxons'; Following page: Top: William Blaeu's map of Europe; Right: 'Peking, the first province of the Chinese empire'



Atlas Maior in such a short period constituted a publishing exploit of the first order".

Janssonius died in 1664, Blaeu in 1673. Their deaths marked the end of the 'atlas arms race' as their successors balked at the high investment and financial risks involved. 



Geographical readers can buy a copy of the new edition of the *Atlas Maior* at the special reduced price of £80 (including free postage and packing within the UK only; normal price £100). To order your copy simply call 01476 541 080 and quote reference 'ATLASNG'

