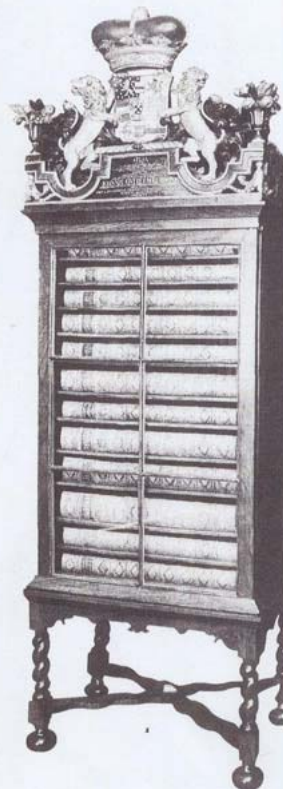
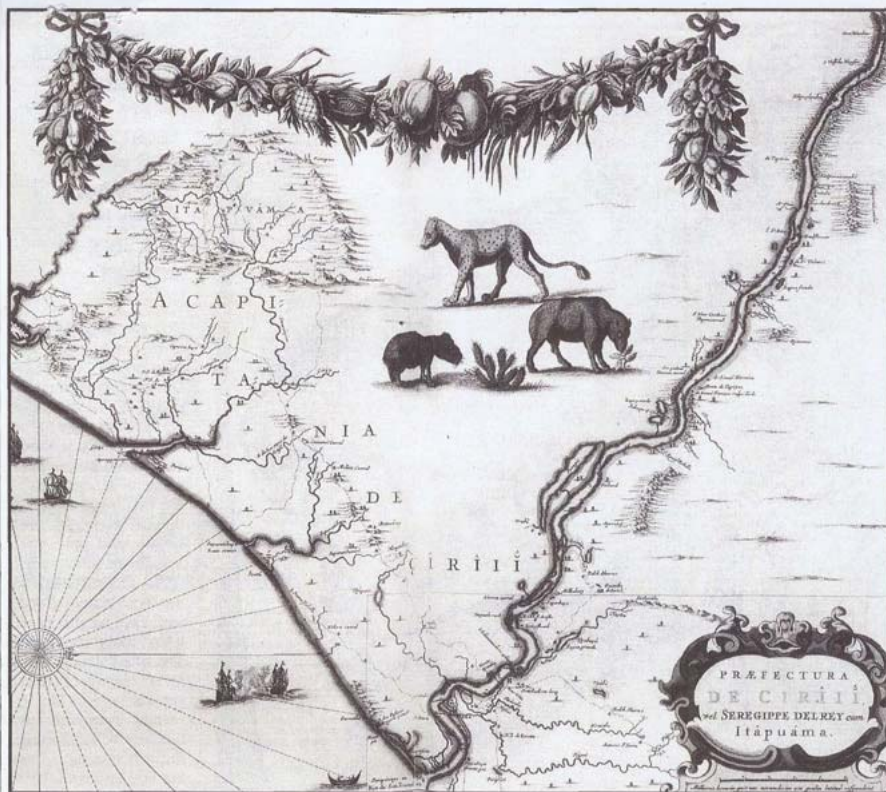


Joan Blaeu's ostentatious and expensive *Atlas maior* of 1662



The bestseller that cost

All the world was held within its precious pages. The wild plains of North America, the exotic cities of China, the spice-rich islands of Indonesia, the bleak wilderness of the Arctic — even Canvey and the badlands of Essex — are picked out with painstaking precision. Nothing had been seen that could compare with Joan Blaeu's *Atlas maior* of 1662 — "the greatest and finest atlas ever published".

Comprising 11 volumes containing 596 maps and lengthy commentaries in Latin, it was perhaps the most lavish publication ever produced and the ultimate status symbol for the educated 17th-century gentleman. It was also the most expensive book he might purchase — new, the atlas has been estimated to have cost the equivalent of £13,500, enough to rent a farm for a year. Its publication ended a long struggle for "world domination" that had gripped Amsterdam for decades — and in effect killed the luxury atlas trade. According to Peter van der Krogt, researcher in the Explorkart research programme for the history of cartography at the University of Utrecht, who wrote the introduction for a new edition of the *Atlas maior*: "It was the apex of atlas production but at the same time it was the end as nobody could surpass Blaeu and so such large atlases were never produced again — it was the last of its kind."

The atlas was born of a fierce competition to capture on paper the mysteries of our planet, and that in its turn had begun with a family feud. For 25 years, the name Hondius, not Blaeu, had been associated with the production of the finest atlases in the Western world. The Amsterdam family had gained a commanding position in the burgeoning market when, early in the 17th century, the engraver and publisher Jodocus Hondius the elder bought the copper plates



Joan Blaeu. *Atlas maior*, 1662

"Geographical maps are simply indispensable. Enlisting their help, we may set eyes on far-off places without so much as leaving home: we traverse impassable ranges, cross rivers and seas in safety; without provisions we range over the whole world; by the power of the imagination we swiftly journey East-West and North-South at a single glance. What greater delight than with our very own eyes to survey the realms and conditions of kings, princes and dukes; to know the positions and remoteness of cities and villages; to have studied not merely the rivers, harbours, bays and capes of different countries but the character and customs of their different regions and peoples, 'what each climate yields and what each disowns'? This we do in maps and their accompanying descriptions."

that had been used to print the maps of the celebrated cartographer Gerard Mercator. While maps had long been sought by merchants and soldiers, public hunger for them had been growing as voyages of discovery expanded European horizons. People wanted to see far-off lands without leaving the safety of their homes.

But individual maps could be unwieldy, and globes were limited in detail. The Antwerp publisher Abraham Ortelius had the idea of binding a set into a single volume, which he published in 1570 with the title *Theatrum orbis terrarum* — *Theatre of the World*. It proved a great commercial success. Of those who followed his lead, Mercator was the most famous, responsible not only for his wall map of 1569 but also

for the first book to be called an "atlas", which was published posthumously in 1595.

A decade later, the long years in which the Hondius family dominated the world atlas trade began when they published a new edition of Mercator's 144-map atlas. Over the years, with no competition, they added only a little to its pages. But this lucrative monopoly was not to last. The business came to be run by Jodocus's son Henricus and Jodocus the younger, and their brother-in-law Johannes Janssonius. There was a falling-out. The younger brother quit the business to set up on his own. To this end, he had 37 new maps engraved. But in 1629, before he could produce an atlas, he died. His family was unable to recover the precious plates — they were beaten to them by another Amsterdam mapmaker, Willem Jansz Blaeu. And so battle commenced.

Blaeu was a manufacturer of globes, nautical maps and navigation guides. He knew the Hondius family — the two households were next-door neighbours in the main Amsterdam street of Damrak. Indeed, van de Krogt says there is no evidence of any personal animosity — business was business and everyone was most likely on speaking terms if not especially friendly. Blaeu was also well aware of his neighbours' business acumen. While they had done little to change the Mercator atlas, they were constantly on the lookout for fresh opportunities. In 1621, within a year of the expiry of the publishing privileges on one of Blaeu's bestsellers — a navigational pilot guide — there was a copied version being sold with the Hondius name attached to it.

The atlas plates gave Blaeu a foothold in the prestigious trade. Within months of gaining them, he published a 60-map volume, using 37 made by Jodocus the younger and 23 of his own. Hondius and Janssonius

was the *ne plus ultra* of its form, and the last of its line, writes **Steve Farrar**



the earth and killed off its kind

doubtless dismayed to find their brother's work turned against them, responded with new atlas of their own containing many maps simply copied from Blaeu. And so it continued. More and more volumes emerged. To the well-to-do public of the day, the hunger was for quantity. They wanted to own the world, to show it off to their friends. The race was on to meet that demand.

Maps were obtained from many sources. Publishers bought maps from dealers. They wrote to scholars across Europe seeking to buy original manuscripts from anyone who had mapped a particular piece of territory. They stripped out previously published vol-

umes from recognised authorities. And, of course, they simply copied one another's latest publications — legal privileges gave only limited protection to a publisher. On February 11, 1634, Blaeu took out a newspaper advertisement announcing that he intended to print a 200-map *Atlas maior*, with Latin, French, German and Dutch editions. The following year, another newspaper advert stated that Hondius and Janssonius would expand on their own *Atlas maior*. Within a fortnight, Blaeu replied with a third advert in which he updated readers on progress towards his publication. But before he could complete the job, he died.

When Joan took over his father's business, the competition grew even more intense.

Willem Blaeu's last atlas contained an impressive 210 maps. But his rivals had replied with a mammoth 320-map, three-part, four-language edition. At this point, Henricus Hondius bowed out of the family business. Now it was Joan Blaeu against Johannes Janssonius. Although neither had surveyed a single piece of land in their lives, they were well versed in acquiring the vital information, reading the market and turning out publications fast. Their opening salvo was to publish an *Atlas novus* each. There followed a succession of ever larger volumes. Janssonius added a sea atlas, so Blaeu added a series of maps of China. Blaeu absorbed the English country maps of John Speed into his latest atlas, so Janssonius simply copied them. By 1658, Blaeu had 403 maps in his six-part *Atlas novus* — Janssonius had 450 in his.

But Blaeu had a grand plan. He wanted to produce an atlas so broad in its scope that it might never be surpassed. The project would involve not only a complete description of the Earth, it would also chart the skies, the seas and include a great number of city plans. When Janssonius further expanded his *Atlas novus* by adding a description of the heavens, Blaeu decided he had to put the first part of his plan into effect. He drew on all his previous publications, sought out new maps direct from their authors and bought plates from other publishers to cover the lands of the Earth and many of its cities. He sourced the finest materials and built up what was then the largest print shop in the world — such was its fame that foreign travellers made trips especially to see it. And he marshalled the necessary resources to meet the requirements of his ambitious operation — the Latin edition alone involved 3,368 pages of text.

'Blaeu drew on all his previous publications, sought out new maps direct from their authors and bought plates from other publishers to cover the lands of the Earth and many of its cities'

Well travelled: clockwise, from top left: Sergipe, Brazil; bookcase specially made for the Atlas maior with the coat-of-arms of Prince Willem Friso, Governor of Frisia; detail of Africa; detail of globe; Bermuda

But it was worth the trouble. When, in 1662, Blaeu's *Atlas maior* was published, it proved a runaway success, and a second edition was printed in 1665. One hundred years after Ortelius's 53-map *Theatrum*, a 596-map luxury atlas costing 450 guilders was being snapped up by the wealthy all across Europe. Copies were to be put on display in private libraries, to be admired and cherished. How many were actually read is another matter. From a scholarly point of view, van der Krogt observes that a lot of its maps were out of date. One of Portugal, for instance, is based on a late 16th-century map itself based on a 15th-century survey. Nevertheless, it was a sellout. Some 950,000 copper plates and 5.4 million pages were produced over 15 years, to make up a total of 1,550 copies in Latin, French, Dutch and Spanish — and none went unsold.

Blaeu was the undisputed winner of the competition — Janssonius had no comeback. But in the process, both families had become very wealthy. Blaeu's dream of including the heavens and oceans in his *Atlas maior* was never realised, though. In 1672, his office burnt down, destroying many of his plates. Two years later he died. Neither Blaeu's nor Janssonius's children showed much interest in continuing the family business — they were already rich. Besides, no one could imagine bettering the *Atlas maior*.

Today, van der Krogt estimates that about a hundred editions of Blaeu's *Atlas maior* survive; the rest have been lost to fire, flood and war. Even as the maps they contained were superseded by ever more accurate versions, such remarkable books were never thrown away.

Joan Blaeu's *Atlas Maior* of 1665 with an introduction by Peter van der Krogt is published this week by Taschen, £100.

