



Blaeu Atlas of Scotland, 1654

Name: Blaeu, Joan, 1596-1673
Title: Southerlandia.
Imprint: [Amsterdam : Blaeu, 1654]
Pagination: 1 map : hand col. ; 362 x 513 mm., on sheet, 530 x 617 mm.
Shelfmark: WD3B/38
Notes: Robert Gordon's map of [Sutherland](#), [Strath Okel](#) & [Strath Charron](#) could be an earlier draft for this map, and carries some additional place names.



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Blaeu Atlas of Scotland, 1654

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Joan Blaeu (c. 1599-1673) by [Christopher Fleet](#)



Joan Blaeu

Joan Blaeu was the eldest son of Willem Janszoon Blaeu (1571-1638), and was probably born in Alkmaar in the province of Noord-Holland in the final years of the 16th century. He was brought up in Amsterdam, and studied law at the University of Leiden before going into partnership with his father in the 1630s. Although his father Willem had cartographic interests, having studied under the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe and having manufactured globes and instruments, his primary business was as a printer. It was under the control of Joan that the Blaeu printing press achieved lasting fame by moving towards the printing of maps and expanding to become the largest printing press in Europe in the 17th century.

Until the late 1620s, the European market for world atlases was dominated by the Mercator maps published by Jodocus Hondius II. However, following the latter's death in 1629, and the growing competition in publishing sea charts and pilot books, the Blaeu business seized its opportunity to publish a grand world atlas: *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* or *Atlas novus*. Willem had already built up extensive contacts across Europe with those who could supply cartographic and topographic information about particular countries (such as [Sir John Scot of Scotstarvit](#) in the case of Scotland) and Joan continued to develop these through active correspondence. A small part of this correspondence, amounting to fifteen letters dated between 1626 and 1657 from Blaeu to Sir John Scot of Scotstarvit, survives in the National Library of Scotland (Adv.MS.17.1.9; Moir and Skelton, 1968).

Progress on the world atlas was initially slow, and by the time of Willem's death in 1638 only two volumes had been published, although several more were in progress. But with the publication of a volume for Italy in 1640, one for England in 1645, and another for Scotland in 1654, Joan Blaeu eclipsed his chief rival, Johannes Janssonius, who from this time never matched the quantity of volumes and maps in Blaeu's magnificent atlas. Recognising that the wealthy patrons who would buy such atlases were primarily interested in display, aesthetic considerations such as luxury bindings, fine engraving, bright colour and beautiful typography were emphasised. The currency of the maps, many of which (as for Scotland) had been drafted over a half-century earlier, and an even geographical spread across the known world, were definitely considered less important.

By the 1660s the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (or *Atlas Maior* as it had become known by this time) had expanded to between 9 and 12 volumes, depending on the language. With over 3,000 text pages and approximately 600 maps, it was the most expensive book money could buy in the later 17th century. The translation of the text from Latin into Dutch, English, German, French, and Spanish for several volumes created enormous work for those involved in typography and letterpress activities. It is estimated that over 80 men must have been employed full-time in the Blaeu printing house in Bloemgracht (not including engravers who worked elsewhere), with over 15 printing presses running simultaneously, and in 1667 a second press was acquired at Gravenstraat. At the same time as producing the *Atlas Maior*, Blaeu was also publishing town plans of Italy, maps for globes, and other volumes. At its peak the Blaeu press managed to produce over 1 million impressions from 1,000 copper plates within four years (Koeman, 1970).

This growth coincided with a period of prosperity for Amsterdam and the Low Countries, and Joan Blaeu's career mirrored this success. He became chief cartographer to the Dutch East India Company from 1638, and from 1651 to 1672 he served on the Amsterdam City Council without a break, holding several public offices. He also invested in Dutch colonial interests in North America. He had married in 1634, and by this time had three sons and three daughters; however, disaster was about to strike.

In February 1672 a fire broke out in the main printing press at Gravenstraat. There are conflicting accounts of the episode, but it is clear that the damage was enormous, destroying not only thousands of paper sheets and printed maps, but also copper plates and metal for type, both of which melted in the heat. Although his other press at Bloemgracht continued, the loss for Joan Blaeu must have been considerable. The situation was made worse by Blaeu's fall from political office under the new regime of William III (of Orange) later in the year. Many of his surviving copper plates were sold, particularly to Pieter Mortier and Frederick de Wit. In December 1673, Joan Blaeu died, leaving his 22-year-old son Joan Blaeu II in control of the company. The Blaeu press continued to publish maps and other works, but its heyday was over, and the firm ceased operations in the early years of the 18th century. A great era in cartographic history was over.



Blaeu Atlas of Scotland, 1654

English Versions of Introductory Material and Descriptions

by [Ian C Cunningham](#), translator of the Latin texts

Volume V of Joan Blaeu's *Atlas novus*, containing maps and descriptions of Scotland and Ireland, was published at Amsterdam in 1654, in Latin, Dutch, French and German editions, with a Spanish one added in 1659. No English edition was published, or even (as far as is known) projected, and so the complete text of this volume has never been available in English, although some of the introductory material has been translated from earlier versions (but not completely or entirely accurately).

The following pages attempt to redress this want, with a translation of the Latin texts (the other editions have not at present been consulted) of the introductory matter and of the Scottish descriptions. Seventeenth-century Latin rarely goes easily into modern English; I have attempted to make the text readable, without departing too far from the structure of the original.

The introductory material consists of Blaeu's letter to the reader in both [shorter](#) and [longer versions](#), the latter with his verses in praise of Sir John Scot of Scotstarvit; [Robert Gordon's letter of 1648 to Scot](#); and the [Imperial privilege](#) to Blaeu for 12 years (the British and Dutch privileges, for 14 and 25 years respectively, are in English and Dutch and so are not translated). All of these texts are important sources for the method of working of [Timothy Pont](#), for the [history of his maps](#) after his death, and for Blaeu's use of them and the assistance given by Robert and James Gordon and Sir John Scot. They have been utilised (in slightly earlier versions of these translations) in *The Nation Survey'd* (2001), especially Chapter 1.

The descriptions of Scotland and of each area of it come from various sources, which are detailed below. Material in square brackets is from the original, either additions by Sir John Scot to existing texts, or taken from side-notes where they add something to the information in the text (mostly they are simple summaries and are omitted). Pop-up notes by the translator mostly relate to misprints and other errors in the originals.

Some of the geographical terminology has been modernised, e.g. in directions, 'aestivus ortus' ('summer rising [of the sun]'), etc., have been rendered as north-east, etc. (except in [Andrew Melville's poem](#), where they are frequently amplified in accordance with poetic diction, and are translated literally). Likewise 'vicecomes' and 'vicecomitatus' when they mean 'sheriff' and 'sheriffdom' have been so rendered. 'Urbs' and 'oppidum', 'montes' and 'colles' have been given their conventional equivalents of 'city' and 'town', 'mountains' and 'hills', although often there seems no distinction between them. But 'amnis', 'flumen' and 'fluvius' are all translated 'river' (sometimes 'water' if that is the modern term), while 'torrens' is 'burn'.

Place names have caused considerable problems: as the same one can appear in one or more Latin forms and also one or more vernacular forms, the only consistent and intelligible method seemed to be to modernise all, as far as possible (with the exception of unidentified places, or original forms required for an etymology, etc.), and to collect all variations in an index, with references to the original passages.

References

Cunningham, I., ed., *The Nation Survey'd: Timothy Pont's Maps of Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press in association with the National Library of Scotland, 2001)



Blaeu Atlas of Scotland, 1654

Sources of the Texts

by [Ian C Cunningham](#), translator of the Latin texts

Immediately after the introductory material comes a poem, '[Topography of Scotland](#)', by Andrew Melville (1545-1622), the scholar and reformer. Nominally addressed to Prince Henry, eldest son of James VI and I, it is substantially a versification of the work of George Buchanan (see below), and can be dated to 1603-04 (after the succession of James and while George Gledstanes was bishop of Caithness). The poem is not known from any other source, and the only mention of it appears to be in a letter of Blaeu to [Sir John Scot](#) thanking him for 'correcting' it. Whatever that implies, the text is full of misprints and wrong punctuations, which suggests that Blaeu's compositor was struggling with a manuscript in a Scots hand. Sir John's known interest in Scottish Latin poetry further suggests that he may have supplied the manuscript.

There follows a series of prose texts on the [antiquity of the Scots](#), the [Roman walls](#), languages, [Thule](#), and the [Ptolemaic map of Scotland](#), all by and attributed to [Robert Gordon of Straloch](#). These are revisions, 1649, of texts composed some time before; the earlier versions survive in manuscript in the National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS. 34.2.8, and are printed from a later transcript in *Macfarlane's Geographical Collections* (Mitchell, 1907).

Next is the first of several extracts from book 1 of George Buchanan's *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* (1582), which deals with the [geography of the British Isles](#) and of [Scotland](#) in particular. After a long polemic on the origin of the name 'Britain', the regions of the Scottish mainland are surveyed in sequence. Later in the book are the sections on the Western, Orkney and Shetland Islands, remarkable for the detailed naming of islands large and small. Buchanan's continuous text has been divided into sections to correspond to the maps of the islands.

[Two papers by Robert Strachan](#), a Benedictine from Montrose, on 'Scottish' monasteries in Germany (in which he does not distinguish between Scots and Irish), had been sent to Sir John Scot in 1641, and he passed them on to Blaeu.

The last introductory sections are anonymous [papers on Scottish government and administration](#), very likely by Sir John Scot.

We now come to the descriptions of the regions, each linked to a map but very rarely actually related to it. The first part of most of these is formed by the short section on the region from the 1607 edition of William Camden's *Britannia*; most are headed 'From Camden', except for the first few, which are anonymous. As already noted, frequent corrections and additions in square brackets are due to Sir John Scot. In addition, many are followed by longer, more detailed descriptions. Two of these are the sole known results of the appeal to ministers to provide such descriptions: [Galloway](#) by John McClellan, and [Lothian](#) by William Forbes of Innerwick. One, of [Sutherland](#), is said to be taken from a manuscript belonging to Sir Robert Gordon (tutor of Sutherland), and may have been provided by Robert Gordon of Straloch. The latter is himself attributed with three ([Renfrew](#), [Fife](#), [Moray](#)), further with [Aberdeen and Banff](#) which was added to the second edition of the Atlas; in addition internal cross-references and titles on the corresponding maps show that he is the author of those of Ross, Sutherland and Caithness. Again earlier versions of all these are in Adv. MS. 34.2.8.

The remainder are anonymous. The '[other](#)' [descriptions of Orkney and Shetland](#) are probably those which Blaeu in his preface mentions as having been provided by a native of Orkney.

A small group consisting of Lothian, Lennox and Stirling are linked by cross-references and by a liking for Hebrew etymologies of place names. They closely resemble the [description of Edinburgh](#) by David Buchanan (NLS, Adv. MS. 31.6.19), which was probably written for the Atlas but for unknown reasons not included. That Buchanan, a friend of Straloch, sent Scot descriptions of some southern regions is known from a letter by him to Straloch of 1650: there can be little doubt that these were the three mentioned.

What still remains is also homogeneous, being typified by references to the state registers and by the inclusion of topographical poems by Arthur Johnston, and linked by cross-references. Sir John Scot was Director of Chancery and editor of Johnston's poems, and is vividly portrayed by Blaeu in his [preface](#) as sitting in Amsterdam writing and dictating new and additional material for the Atlas. The Merse, Ayrshire, Perthshire, Orkney and Shetland and the many additions must be by him.

Buchanan, G., *Rerum Scoticarum Historia*, [History of Scotland], (Edimburgi: apud Alexandrum Arbuthnetum typographum regium, anno M.D.LXXXII. [1582]).

Camden, W., *Britannia, siue Florentissimorum regnorum Angliae, Scotiae, Hiberniae, et insularum adiacentium ex intima antiquitate chorographica descriptio: : nunc postremò recognita, plurimis locis magna accessione adaucta, & chartis chorographicis illustrata*. [Britain, or A chorographicall description of the most flourishing kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland, and the ilands adioyning, out of the depth of antiquitie: : beautified vvith mappes of the severall shires of England], (Londini : [printed by Eliot's Court Press] impensis Georgii Bishop & Ioannis Norton, M.DC.VII. [1607]).

Cunningham, I., ed., *The Nation Survey'd: Timothy Pont's Maps of Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press in association with the National Library of Scotland, 2001)

Mitchell, A., *Geographical Collections relating to Scotland made by Walter Macfarlane II* (Edinburgh, 1907)

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Blaeu Atlas of Scotland, 1654

A Vision of Scotland: Joan Blaeu and the *Atlas novus*

by [Charles W J Withers](#), Professor of Historical Geography, University of Edinburgh

'Continue now, look at Scotland, and enjoy a feast for the eyes'. So writes Joan Blaeu in his 'Greetings to the Reader', part of the preliminary material to his 1654 *Atlas novus*. He is right to so enjoin us. To modern readers, the maps present a window on Scotland's past: here is a country before large-scale urbanisation and industrialisation, a small and old country of ferm towns and nobles' seats. To Blaeu's contemporaries, the vision of Scotland presented in his Atlas would have been even more striking. Here was their present geography laid out as never before. With such an Atlas, travel and seeing for one's self was no longer always necessary, for here, in maps – now so commonplace but then relatively unfamiliar objects of status and of wonder – lay a visual prospect of the nation.

Yet feasting the eyes, then and now, depends upon making sense of what one sees. That is why the maps in Blaeu's *Atlas novus* are accompanied by textual descriptions of Scotland and its regions. Strictly, the descriptive passages that here accompany the mapped images are chorographical rather than geographical. Chorography, the practice of regional description, was widely employed in this period. In chorography, map and text were integrated parts of a whole. The maps in Blaeu's *Atlas novus* are principally the work of Timothy Pont with additional material provided by Robert Gordon of Straloch and others, all saved for posterity and put into the hands of Blaeu by Sir John Scot of Scotstarvit. The history and content of these maps, particularly Pont's contribution, has been the subject of considerable study (Cunningham 2001; Stone 1989, 1991; and see the [Pont maps website](#)). This introduction focuses on the textual descriptions relating to Scotland in the Scotland and Ireland volume (Volume V) of the 1654 *Atlas novus* and on additional descriptive material in the Atlas's 1662 edition, namely Robert Gordon's description of Aberdeen and Banff. Who wrote these chorographical texts? How did they go about it? Why? What purpose did such textual descriptions serve? Indeed, what, more exactly, was chorography?

- [Chorography and Early Modern Geographical Description](#)
- [The *Atlas novus*: Its Background and Authors](#)
- ['Our Scotland is Put on View': National and Regional Description in the *Atlas novus*](#)
- [References](#)

Chorography and Early Modern Geographical Description

Geography in the age of Pont and Blaeu was not as we would now understand the term. Early modern geographical knowledge drew upon natural history, astrology, even natural magic and was apparent in various forms: descriptive geography, mathematical geography – of importance to navigators and in mapmaking – and, notably, chorography. Chorography as understood and practised in the late 16th and 17th centuries drew upon the work of the classical authority Claudius Ptolemaeus (known as Ptolemy). In Book I of his eight-book *Geographia*, Ptolemy distinguished between geography and chorography: 'The purpose of Geography is to represent the unity and continuity of the known world in its true nature and location ... The aim of Chorography is to represent only a part'. Crucially, chorography was a qualitative art: 'Chorography therefore concentrates more on the quality of places than on their quantity or scale, aware that it should use all means to sketch the true form or likeness of places and not so much their correspondence, measure or disposition amongst themselves or with the heavens or with the whole of the world' (cited in Withers 2001a, 140-1).

The intellectual worlds of the late 16th and 17th centuries recognised and used this crucial distinction between geography, the accurate representation of the whole known world, and chorography, the pictorial and written 'impression' of local areas and places, without regard to what we moderns would take to be quantitative accuracy. Chorography appealed to late Renaissance intellectual ideas of order. But it did more than that. For three reasons, 'The chorographic/geographic distinction was perhaps the most important classifying scheme for maps in 16th-century Europe' (Mundy 1996, 5). It was a means to classify existing maps. It created a standard dual model of how space should in future be mapped. It corresponded to models of the political state: 'indeed, its contours followed the fault lines between regionalism and nationalism' (Mundy 1996, 5-6). The distinction was widely employed throughout the late 16th and 17th centuries in Europe, Japan, Russia and the Portuguese and Spanish colonies of the New World (Withers 2001a). In England in this period – and, after 1603, in the newly created geographical entity that was 'Great Britain' – chorography was 'the most wide-ranging of the geographical arts, in that it provided the specific detail to make concrete the other general branches of

Chorography's textual features took several forms. Description of places and regions very commonly incorporated topographical poetry: 'self-fashioning' through versifying was a commonplace in Elizabethan accounts of land and nation (Greenblatt 1980; Helgerson 1986, 1992; Klein 2001). Chorography emphasised the local and did so historically and geographically: with reference, for example, to the genealogies of families of note, and to the remarkable features in a place. This attention to place had political significance in that matters of a local nature – notable families, distinctive natural features, historical antiquities and such like – were made to appear part of that place, fixed over time as well as in space. Because of this, chorography – with geography one of what the late Renaissance and early modern worlds understood as the 'eyes of history' – was closely associated with chronology (the other 'eye'), with antiquarianism and with emerging ideas of public utility and of national identity (Cormack 1991a, 1997; Mayhew 2001).

In sum, chorography was a particular form of geographical knowledge, rooted in certain intellectual traditions and apparent in words and maps, that was concerned to capture the 'impression' of a region or place. It was, textually, an essentially conservative form of regional description in as much as it assumed the continued authority of the monarchy and nobility. That fact in turn is why chorographical writing often lauds leading families and prominent individuals of note: patronage, patriotism and the political well-being of the realm revealed through its regional portrayal were closely associated elements in Blaeu's world.

The *Atlas novus*: Its Background and Authors

Joan Blaeu's *Atlas novus* did not spring fully borne from the head of that single Dutchman. It is a work of compilation as, to varying extents, are the works it relies upon. Joan Blaeu was a leading Amsterdam mapmaker. His prowess was recognised in the civil offices he held: from 1638, mapmaker to the Dutch East India Company and, between 1651 and 1672, a member of Amsterdam City Council. The maps of Scotland that form part of the *Atlas novus* are part of a scheme for a multi-volume world atlas, a scheme hatched by Joan's father, Willem Janszoon Blaeu.

Recognising the long-run intellectual tradition and particular publishing project in which it stood is helpful to making sense of Blaeu's *Atlas novus*. But it is not sufficient for a full understanding. Timothy Pont's chorographic endeavours at the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th centuries are crucial. The maps and verses he left provide for Scotland – and for Europe – a hugely-important map of the realm and a key moment in early modern mapping (Cunningham, 2001; Stone 1989, 1991; see especially the [Pont maps website](#)). Three further related elements explain how the work came about and why it took the form it did. The first is the impetus afforded by the Antwerp-born mapmaker, Abraham Ortelius. The second, and the most important, is the influence of that pioneering work of British chorography, William Camden's *Britannia*, first published in 1586. Finally, Blaeu drew upon geographical descriptions from a variety of Scots, none a geographer in any formal sense, but each of whom provided chorographical accounts of parts of the nation.

In 1570, Abraham Ortelius published as a single folio volume his *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, a comprehensive collection of maps of the world's countries. With its publication the idea of the modern atlas as a bound collection of maps of uniform size was born. Ortelius's means of working was as a compiler of others' works: a pioneering feature of his *Theatrum* was his *Catalogus Cartographorum*, in which the authorities for his work – 87 in all – are listed. The *Theatrum* was immediately successful. From 1625, Willem Blaeu acquired the copyright for the work. In 1631, the elder Blaeu produced an appendix to the work, and, in 1634, published the first volume of his own intended world atlas entitled *Theatrum orbis terrarum sive Atlas novus*. This 'new Atlas' was the endeavour to which Joan was contributing in his 1654 work.

Like his contemporaries, Ortelius was interested in regional description, in historical origins and in subjecting ancients' geographical accounts to scholarly scrutiny. These interests were reflected in other works, such as his *Synonymia Geographica*, published in 1578 (later revised and published as *Thesaurus Geographicus* in 1587 and 1596), and, importantly, his *Parergon* (1584). Such works, like others of the period, were part of a 'new beginning' in late Renaissance geography, evident in the emergence of specific geographical genres and methods (Mayhew 2001). *Parergon* is a collection of maps illustrating ancient history, chiefly mainland Europe's Roman legacy. It does not include Britain. Yet in 1577, Ortelius had met the man who would in his own work provide an historical and geographical account of Britain – or, to use its correct title as a Roman province, *Britannia*. That man was William Camden.

William Camden was a 35-year-old Oxford-educated schoolmaster when he published *Britannia* in 1586, a historical and geographical description of the British Isles. He did so at Ortelius's prompting, in order to provide coverage of Britain hitherto lacking. The work was hugely successful. Later and revised editions appeared throughout Camden's lifetime and long after: the descriptive passages relating to Scotland do not appear until the much-expanded 1607 Latin edition. Like Blaeu's *Atlas novus* in which he is much cited, Camden's *Britannia* draws upon others' works. In Britain, he knew of John Leland's chorographical work from the 1530s, and William Lambarde's *A Perambulation of Kent* (1576), the first English county history. Amongst European authors, he was influenced by the Italian chorographer, Flavio Biondo, whose *Italia Illustrata* was published in 1474. Camden undertook his own 'perambulations' throughout England (but never travelled to mainland Europe). In Oxford especially, and in London, he was part of the overlapping social and intellectual circles of influential men then engaging with the power of geography: John Dee, the alchemist and the first to speak of the 'British Empire' (Dee introduced Ortelius and Camden); John Stow the topographer and author, in 1599, of the *Survey of London*; Richard Hakluyt the Younger; Richard Carew of Antony in Cornwall, author in 1602 of the *Survey of Cornwall*; and Sir Philip Sidney, the Elizabethan adventurer. One contact, Daniel Rogers, the Latin poet and diplomatist, was even related to

This context explains much of why *Britannia* appeared when it did, but not why it was so successful and influential. *Britannia*'s importance and success rests in its method. Camden departed from the uncritical acceptance of classical authorities and subjected their claims to examination. This required the analysis of written documents and other artefacts: coins, built remains and such like. It meant tracing the origins of things: of place names, settlements, historical features, customary beliefs, even of nations (Parry 1995). It demanded, where it was possible to do so, seeing things for one's self. Camden did not agree with his portrayal as a 'historian'. He certainly would not have understood one modern ascription of him as 'one of the first archival positivists' (Collinson 1998, 141). He would have recognised his description as an 'antiquarian' and chorographer – for that is what he was. As has been noted, 'The relating of history to landscape was a permanent achievement of *Britannia* ... The Land was rich in history, and Camden was for the first time making this richness geographically explicit and available, 'for the honour of his native country', as he announces in his Preface' (Parry 1995, 38).

Britannia is a major monument of British and European history and Camden a key figure amongst the 'authors' cited in the *Atlas novus*. But his contribution to the Atlas is important because it is, in several respects, added to and even corrected by Scottish commentators describing their country's regional and national geography. Most significant in this respect is the Scottish humanist and historian, George Buchanan, and his 1582 *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* [History of Scotland]. Buchanan begins his History with a detailed geographical description of Scotland. For one modern historian, 'Buchanan's description of Scotland is, in fact, a remarkable *tour de force* ... 'a brilliant comprehensive description of the geography of Scotland' (Ferguson 1998, 87). Why did Buchanan have such a 'geography' in a work of history? Because, like others at the time, Buchanan knew that geography, as one of the 'eyes of history' and in the form of chorography, was an essential part of historical understanding of one's nation (Withers 2001b, 41-47). So, too, for Robert Gordon of Straloch, the map maker and chorographer who contributed maps and text to the Atlas (Stone 1981, 1998), his namesake, Sir Robert Gordon, who contributes a description of Sutherland dated at about 1630, and his own son, James Gordon, whose work on Aberdeenshire is included here.

At much the same time, Scottish men of letters and political influence were drawing together geographical writings. Important in this respect are manuscript 'Topographical Descriptions relating to Scotland', compiled by Sir James Balfour of Denmilne, Lord Lyon King of Arms, between c.1632 and c.1654, and a draft 'Geographical Dictionary', chiefly listing the etymology of place names, which Balfour undertook with John Lawder, Lord Fountainhall (Withers 2001b, 49-50). In August 1641, Sir John Scot of Scotstarvit, Director of the Chancery – and the key link between the Blaeu mapmaking firm and Pont's maps – announced his intentions to 'have a description of our Shyredomes'. In 1642, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland instructed its presbyteries 'to sett down the descriptions of there severall paroches according to the alphabet [set of instructions] then given to the several commissioners to deliver to there presbyteries and to report the same to the chancellorie'. Scot was using the Church of Scotland to co-ordinate map and textual descriptions for inclusion in Blaeu's Atlas. The Church did what it could: the Atlas project was discussed six times at its General Assembly between 1641-1649. But these were troubled times – of Civil War, and religious turmoil – and Scot's project was never completed (Stevenson 1982; Withers 2001b, 50-1). Even so, the geographical work of a handful of ministers found its way into the *Atlas*: John MacLellan, a Newtonards schoolmaster and Kirkcudbright minister, wrote a geographical description of Galloway. William Forbes of Innerwick wrote on the Lothians. William Spang, who although cited in the Atlas as 'Spangius' has no text attributed to him, was classics master at Edinburgh's High School before serving as a minister at Middelburg in Walcheren in Holland from 1630 to 1652 (Scott 1915-1961, 1: 410; 2: 417; 7: 541). William Spang acted as 'desk editor' for the project, incorporating material from varied sources, including his cousin, the Glasgow academic, Robert Baillie (Mann, 2001).

Given this background and its multiple 'authorship', Blaeu's *Atlas novus* should be understood not as the product of one man's interest in just one country – Scotland – but as part of interrelated European scholarly and political worlds. For monarchs, ministers, mapmakers, merchants and mathematicians alike, geography and cartography were necessary routes to state knowledge, commercial expansion and historical understanding.

'Our Scotland is Put on View': National and Regional Description in the *Atlas novus*

Given what we now know about their provenance and purpose, it is easier to understand what is written in these textual descriptions in the Atlas, how they are written, and why. They are in several places actually referred to as 'chorographic' descriptions. They contain, in one way or another, the essential features of the form: an interest in genealogy; the etymology of place names; summaries of the local economy; remarks upon natural features; qualitative judgements upon the airs and waters of places; poetic accounts and so on.

In his introductory materials, Blaeu recognises the key roles played by Robert Gordon – who is described as being so taken up with his chorographical and map work that 'The man seemed to me to be in himself Scotland' – and of Sir John Scot of Scotstarvit, the 'contractor and tutor' of Pont and Gordon's maps, through whose role as intermediary 'our Scotland is put on view'. Pont's work is in the background, as it were, in much of Robert Gordon's texts. Occasionally Pont is directly cited, as in the 1662 notes on Aberdeenshire where Pont is attributed as the authority for remarks on the purity of the water in Strath Avon. The emphasis afforded to antiquity by Robert Gordon in his 'Notes on the Antiquity of the Scots' and in 'A Very Brief Description of the Kingdom of Scotland' (taken from Buchanan's History) is stylistically consistent with many other works of chorography. The positioning of this in the Atlas makes a political point. Here, in Gordon's terms at least, Scotland's historical identity is being asserted and realised in word and image, an identity

as Great Britain. As Gordon puts it, 'our case must be presented or our recognisance forfeited'.

Camden's remarks upon places and regions are included. For some regions, the description, from Camden or others, is of little value: there is nothing much for Liddesdale, Ewesdale, Annandale, Knapdale and for Lauderdale, for example, and some of the Inner Hebridean islands – Jura, Islay, Rum, Mull – are likewise poorly covered. In the case of [Lauderdale](#), we are told why: the area's description was promised by Lord John, Earl of Lauderdale, but he was captured at the Battle of Worcester [in the Civil War]: 'Enjoy these, Reader, until he has been restored, or some other has provided better'. For [Knapdale](#), too: 'More doubtless could be said about this province, which the harshness of the time prevents'. Here is evidence that political affairs locally undermined attempts at national geographical description.

Other regions and districts have full descriptions and, in their way, provide almost 'models' of the type: Lothian, The Merse, Tweeddale, Galloway, Lennox, Sutherland, Caithness, Orkney and Shetland to name several. For some regions, the Atlas is important in collating descriptions from different authors at different dates. The result is a 'thick description' in which we learn something not just of what Scotland's geography looked like in mid-17th century, but how historians worked in building on one another's works. Occasionally, a word or phrase captures the imagination. For John MacLellan, 'The whole of Galloway has the shape of an elephant: the head is the Rhinns, the trunk the Mull, the feet the promontories stretching into the sea, the shoulders the mountains mentioned above, the spine of the back the rocks and moors, the rest of the body the rest of the region' ([page 49](#)). And of the Orkney island of Walls, we are told that 'Its south coast is gnawed at as if by a rabid dog by the Pictish strait [Pentland Firth]; its waves like so many teeth are strongly resisted by the very high and hard cliffs which stretch out before this island, and blunt the bite' ([page 138](#)).

The '[New Description of Shetland](#)' (including 'Another Description of the Same Islands') is a fine chorography. The name itself is discussed, the author noting that Buchanan spelt it differently. The natural products are commented upon, so, too, the sorts of fish, the strength of local ales, the manner of the inhabitants. The first of the two descriptions ends with some remarks about notable families, the second in a short discussion of Ptolemaic accounts. This last point is illustrative of the intent not just to subject Scotland's present geography to critical view, but also to review earlier claims in the light of later knowledge. Thus, of 'Ross' [Ross-shire], part of 'The Farthest Shore of Scotland', the author notes the names given in 'the ancient geography' ([page 97](#)).

A feature of the descriptions taken from Camden is the poetic depiction of places. Most of this is from the work of the two Aberdeenshire poets, John Johnston, who was born around 1570 and died in 1611, and his namesake, Arthur Johnston (1587-1641). Epigrams on towns – their intrinsic beauty, their historical significance, notable natives and so on – were common in chorography. We are given here verse descriptions of Aberdeen, Ayr, Cupar, Dumfries, Dundee, Forfar, Glasgow, Perth, St Andrews and Stirling. The place of the Johnstons' work in the Atlas again illustrates the social and intellectual networks that lie behind Blaeu's achievement. One of Arthur Johnston's works was edited by William Spang and published at Middelburg, in 1642, and paid for by Sir John Scot of Scotstarvit. John Johnston was Regius Professor of Divinity at St Andrews from 1593 to 1611 and, like his namesake, was an associate of Andrew Melville, the leading Presbyterian theologian. Like the Johnstons, Melville found time to contribute to the poetic depiction of Scotland. His *Scotia Topographia* which was written sometime between 1603 and 1612 is, essentially, a versification of Buchanan's chorographical description of Scotland, with some additional features, notably lines in praise of Glasgow. It is addressed to Prince Henry who had numerous geographers in his court circles (Cormack 1991b).

The fact that so much of the descriptive language in Blaeu's *Atlas novus* is qualitative in nature – offering a view or an impression – means that questions like 'Is it true?' are, in a strict sense, irrelevant. There is no reason to suppose that Pabbay was any more infested with robbers or the islands in Loch Lomond more infested with snakes than other parts of Scotland. These descriptions are what the regions and places looked like and were perceived to be. It is not appropriate to judge the geographies we are given here by the later languages of scientific exactitude. It is important, however, that we see the chorography in Blaeu's *Atlas novus* not as an antiquated account of a Scotland long ago, but in its own terms: as up-to-date and lively vision of the nation. It depicts a nation by describing its places. Certain places – Amsterdam, Oxford, London, St Andrews – are more important to its publishing history than others. And certain people are likewise: an English antiquarian, a Scottish historian, a Scots politician, a handful of Scottish chorographers and churchmen and, not least, a Dutch mapmaker. Blaeu's *Atlas novus* stands not just as a monument to Scotland's vision of itself but to how geographical enquiry was undertaken and produced in 17th-century Europe.

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Blaeu Atlas of Scotland, 1654

The history behind the publication of the Blaeu Atlas of Scotland

by [Christopher Fleet](#)

The publication in 1654 of Volume V of Blaeu's *Atlas novus* was the result of over 70 years of cartographic, chorographic, and editorial activity, by a dispersed network of people in Scotland and the Low Countries. Through their combined efforts, dogged by war, poverty, copyright restrictions, and only intermittent official support, 'Scotland became one of the best mapped countries in the world' (Stone, 1989), and the Atlas remains to this day a uniquely significant landmark publication. Yet most of the maps themselves had been drafted over half a century earlier, a considerable number of the accompanying descriptive texts were even older still, and despite decades of editorial work, one of its leading contributors, [Robert Gordon of Straloch](#) was to complain in its [prefatory pages](#) that 'There were many things to be altered, added, deleted, which now await a new edition'. This brief account explains some of the reasons for this situation, describes the faltering progress on compiling the different constituents of the Atlas, and summarises the important roles played by many people in ensuring Timothy Pont's original survey work found its way into print at all.

- ['Defeated by the avarice of printers and booksellers', 1590-1628](#)
- [Balfour, Scot, Gordon and Blaeu, 1628-1641](#)
- [The Church and James Gordon's surveys, 1641-1649](#)
- [The drive towards publication, 1645-1654](#)
- [The states of the Atlas](#)
- [References](#)

'Defeated by the avarice of printers and booksellers', 1590-1628

This famous quote from Robert Gordon's letter to [Sir John Scot](#), explaining [Timothy Pont's](#) failure to publish his corpus of maps, is backed up by evidence from early Scottish printing history. It is noteworthy that Timothy's elder brother Zachary was appointed 'chief printer within this realm' in October 1590, a position that would surely have facilitated publishing for Timothy. No surviving books are attributed to Zachary, and in that his appointment was preceeded by that of Robert Waldegrave by two weeks, who remained as King's Printer until 1603, we can only assume Zachary's appointment had little practical value (Mann, 2000). In 1606 the Edinburgh printer Thomas Finlayson acquired a 25-year licence under the Privy Seal, amongst other things to print and import all maps and charts (Aldis, 1896). There were also less official agreements. For example, in January 1607 Andro Hart, Scotland's wealthiest publisher and bookseller in the early 17th century, entered into a contract with two other printers, Richard Lawson and James Cathkine, 'not to print na manner of buiks mappes cairtis nor na utheris werkes...without the speciall mutuall and common advys and consent of us all thrie togidder' (NAS, RD1/313, 267r). It is significant that Hart was responsible for sponsoring the only Pont map engraved during Pont's lifetime, his map of Lothian and Linlithgow sometime before 1611, through Hart's contacts with the Hondius engraver/publishers in Amsterdam. Hart was one of the few printers in Scotland with the resources to attempt publication of an atlas of Pont's maps, yet he did not do so, and it may well be that the copyright granted to Finlayson eclipsed his own private contract, and acted as a deterrent for map printing at this time (Mann, 2001). The expiry of Finlayson's copyright in 1628 coincides with the first reference to Pont's manuscript maps after his death, and a new phase of interest in their publication. A letter from Charles I to Sir William Alexander (Secretary of State) in February 1629, shows that [Sir James Balfour of Denmilne](#) had acquired the maps from Pont's heirs in or shortly before 1628 (Roger, 1885, quoted in RSGS, 1973). This same letter also notes James VI's unrealised intention to have money given to Pont, and orders the payment of £100 to Balfour for his 'great panis and charges' in order to get the maps published.

Balfour, Scot, Gordon and Blaeu, 1628-1641

Sir James Balfour may have briefly entertained thoughts of publishing Pont's maps, and his manuscript 'Topographical Descriptions relating to Scotland', including his transcription of Pont's description of Cunningham (NLS Adv.MS.33.2.27), show that he compiled chorographic texts suitable for such a purpose. Yet by June 1631 we know that he had passed at least some of them on, through Sir John Scot of Scotstarvit, to the Blaeu publishers in Amsterdam, who responded with glowing thanks. 'Your letter, with that of Master Balfour attached, and the map of the Merce, which I have received, place it beyond my power to express how much you will have put posterity in your debt here and elsewhere when as I intend I

Sir John Scot (1585-1670) was undoubtedly a key figure in the publication of the Blaeu Atlas of Scotland, holding important political offices of Director of Chancery, Lord of Session and Privy Councillor, and through these having the right contacts and influence in Scotland and the Low Countries. From the mid-1620s, Scot had been in correspondence with Willem Blaeu about the publication of a volume of Latin poetry, and the discovery in 1967 of 15 further letters (NLS Adv.MS.17.1.9) from Willem and his son Johann (or Joan) Blaeu to Scot, between 1626-1633 and 1641-1657, provide vital information on the intermittent progress with the Blaeu Atlas (Moir & Skelton, 1968). From these we know that through some means the Blaeus had obtained a Pont map of Orkney and Shetland as early as 1626, and an engraved proof of this with Scots arms was sent to Scot in 1628. We also know through a later letter of 10 March 1642 that by this time Blaeu had engraved as many as 40 of the 49 maps within the Atlas, and he provided a detailed list of remaining areas for which maps were lacking.

From the evidence of his surviving manuscript maps, and his letter in the Blaeu Atlas, it is clear that Robert Gordon of Straloch had been enlisted to help in the project from the early 1630s, and certainly before 1636. It seems likely that at least some of Pont's manuscript maps were returned to Scotland between 1633-1636 (Stone, 2001), and together with Pont's written descriptions, these formed primary source material for over 61 surviving maps of Scotland that Gordon compiled between 1636 and 1641. Another letter from Charles I in October 1641 shows that the King had been shown proofs of the engraved maps, and he again encouraged progress on the project, exempting Robert Gordon from his official duties (Spalding Club, 1841, quoted in RSGS, 1973). Robert Gordon's skills were probably more chorographic than cartographic (Stone, 1981), and he compiled several of the historical descriptions of Scotland as well as regional descriptions for northern territories within the Atlas. As Blaeu's requests for material became more urgent in the 1640s, he failed to provide the detailed maps of territories requested by Blaeu, sending instead the less detailed regional maps of *Extima Scotiae* and *Braid-Allaban* ... Indeed, it has been suggested that his work in drafting maps that Blaeu had not requested, as well as engaging his son James to undertake fresh surveys of areas such as Fife and Stirlingshire that were already mapped, indicate a confusion over what Blaeu needed, and perhaps another purpose altogether (Stone, 1998).

The Church and James Gordon's surveys, 1641-1649

In August 1641, Sir John Scot made a petition to the General Assembly for a 'description of our Shyredomes, by some in everie Presbytrie' (Baillie, 1841-2), and by January 1642 the Church had instructed its commissioners to prepare information on its parishes according to a written list of instructions. In that these topographical descriptions could include both maps and written text, Scot was trying to encourage work through the Church that could contribute to the maps as well as the chorography within the Atlas. Some progress was initially made in Fife (perhaps promoted by Scot), by the presbytery of Kirkcaldy, and in St Andrews, with further sporadic work in Carrick, Galloway, part of Lanark and East Lothian, but thereafter support for the project waned (Stevenson, 1982; Withers, 2001). Although the General Assembly urged compliance a further four times between 1643 and 1649, the Montrose campaigns of 1644-1645, the Engagement Crisis of 1648, and execution of the King in 1649 unfortunately focused clerical attentions elsewhere.

Of greater value for Scottish cartography was the General Assembly's decision in August 1642 to release Robert Gordon's son James, *Parson of Rothiemay* from his ministerial duties to complete a new map of Fife, published in the Atlas as *Fifae Vicecomitatus*. A letter from Scot to Robert Gordon dated 2 September 1645 praises James for keeping of copy of this map, as the original had been stolen in transit to Amsterdam by a Dunkirk ship (Spalding Club, 1641)! By October 1646 James had proceeded to Aberdeen to prepare a very detailed description and map of the town, as well as assist in his father's description of the county. He then proceeded swiftly on to Edinburgh, where in April 1647 the Town Council paid him 500 merks (£350 scots) for drawing his *spectacular map of Edinburgh*, a bird's-eye view from the south that has remained famous to this day. Although both these plans were completed by 1649, they were not engraved by Blaeu until much later (1655-1656 for Edinburgh, and 1661 for Aberdeen), and never appeared in the Atlas. Similarly, the Glasgow burgh council minutes in June 1641 record the payment of James Coquhoun 'fyve dollars for drawing a portrait of the town to be sent to Holland' (Marwick, 1914, cited in Mann, 2001), but no published view or plan of Glasgow by him survives.

There is further record of activity on the Atlas without results. In September 1647 the General Assembly instructed James to survey the county of Stirling, although no map or description survives, and the engraved *Sterlinensis Praefectura* in the Atlas remains very much the work of Pont. The following year he was requested to compile a map of Angus by the nobility of the shire through the Earl of Southesk, but no work survives as proof that such a survey took place, and doubts remain over whether James Gordon or the Earl of Southesk had misplaced Pont's map of the county (Stevenson, 1982). Whatever the truth, Pont's map still survives, but no map of Angus appeared in the Blaeu Atlas, and Robert Edward's less detailed *map of the county*, published in 1678, also fails to make use of Pont's work (Martin, 1980).

The drive towards publication, 1645-1654

In September 1645 Sir John Scot escaped the Civil War in Scotland by visiting the Low Countries, and assisted Blaeu directly with the Atlas. By 1645 Blaeu had published Volume IV of his *Atlas novus* covering England and Wales, and had moved on to the *Town Atlas of the Netherlands*, yet had only eight of the Scottish descriptions completed by this time

regional shapes, situations, boundaries, old and more recent lords, produce of the soil, cities, rivers, and similar matters in great profusion' ([Joan Blaeu's longer letter](#)). Robert Gordon was given further Parliamentary exemptions from official duties in 1646 and 1649, again demonstrating official encouragement in the Atlas project, yet Blaeu had reason to continually seek more than Gordon was able to deliver. Doubts remain over quite what proofs Gordon saw of the Atlas prior to its publication, and in his [prefatory letter](#) he mentioned his wish 'that I had been allowed to unroll and pore over all Pont's autographs before they experienced the engraver's hand'. A further revealing remark in the 'Topographical Notices of Scotland' (Adv.MS.34.2.8) accompanying Gordon's description of Aberdeen (so presumably drafted in the late 1640s or early 1650s) notes 'The printer has as yet sent me nothing of what, induced by persistent requests, I had caused to be given to him in a half-finished state' (Mitchell, 1908, vol.II, p. 289).

Other contributions to the Atlas came from varied sources, and there is evidence of Robert Baillie, the Glasgow academic, despatching arms for dedications on the maps, via his cousin William Spang, minister of Veere and later Middleburg, who acted as 'desk-editor' for the project (Baillie, 1841; Mann, 2001). Samuel Wallace, deputy conservator and factor at Veere, Scotland's staple port in the Netherlands, was primarily responsible for transmitting material for inclusion to Blaeu, and in 1647 he reported to Gordon that Blaeu would take no further work in hand until the maps of Scotland were finished. In March 1647 Blaeu applied to the Scottish Parliament for copyright protection for his Atlas from the English Parliament (which had already been granted in Scotland) indicating that he was close to publication. By March 1649, Blaeu informed Scot that he was already beginning to print Scotland and intended to finish it that year, if only the descriptions were supplied. Amongst the final material to be compiled were Robert Gordon's [notes on the map of Old Scotland](#), drafted in December 1649, and the accompanying [Scotia Antiqua](#), map which was engraved by Blaeu in 1653. (The arrangement of groups of maps within the Atlas provide useful inferences on their order of engraving and authorship (Stone, 1980))

Unfortunately, other events conspired against Blaeu, and for a period of five years from 1649 progress on the Atlas was largely halted. The execution of the King in January 1649 and the new Cromwellian administration deprived Sir John Scot of his official posts by 1652, and a war between Britain and Holland (1652-1654) caused further delays. However, even before peace was declared in April 1654, Blaeu was in contact with Commonwealth forces in Scotland, and a [14 year licence](#) was granted by Cromwell for publication of the Atlas on 14 June 1654. Blaeu also received [licences from the States-General in the Netherlands \(10 June 1654\)](#), and the [Holy Roman empire \(11 August 1654\)](#), all of which were printed in the first edition, securing comprehensive copyright. With some justification Gordon could write in his [prefatory letter](#) 'Now at last, after many labours endured, the loss of much time and troubles such as the mind shudders to recall, our Scotland is put on view ...'

The states of the Atlas

The Atlas of Scotland therefore appeared as Volume V of Blaeu's *Atlas novus*, including 49 maps of Scotland and six maps of Ireland. As the Atlas was not bound until ordered, a wide number of different states are known to exist, only some of which can be dated. All editions of the Atlas contain the main body of maps and texts, one of the versions of Blaeu's address to the Reader; the States-General's privilege; [Andrew Melville's poem on Scottish topography](#), and Robert Gordon's '[Notes on the antiquity of the Scots](#)'. However, one or more of the other prefatory items may be omitted. Our website aims to include all main elements known to exist from different versions of the Atlas. Although the National Library of Scotland's copy of the Atlas shown here (Koeman's *Atlantes Neerlandici* 2:401,Qe) includes [Blaeu's longer letter to the reader](#), the [dedication from Blaeu to Scot](#) and the Cromwellian and Imperial privileges, we have also included a translation of [Blaeu's shorter letter to the reader](#) from a copy at the National Museums of Scotland, which lacks these latter elements. The catalogue of kings of Scotland exists in two versions, one ending with Charles II (to satisfy supporters of the Royal Family in exile in Breda), the other ending with James VI (for supporters of the Protectorate). Scot's Royalist sympathies may also explain why some copies do not have Blaeu's dedication to him, nor Robert Gordon's 1648 letter to him; the two-line epigraph from Blaeu to Scot was not included in the Atlas until 1656 or later. (Van der Krogt, 2000)

Editions of the Atlas with Dutch, French and German texts swiftly followed the Latin edition during 1654. In March 1656 Scot sent Robert Gordon's detailed description of Aberdeen and Banff to Blaeu, which appeared in copies of the Spanish edition from 1659, but did not appear in Latin until 1662. The text was reset for this second Latin edition of 1662, by this time appearing as Volume VI of Blaeu's *Atlas Maior*, but the only other plate changes were the addition of compass roses and ships on 28 map plates where they were originally lacking. There were later editions in French (1663), Dutch (1664) and Spanish (post-1664).

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