In the seventeenth century, the Blaeu family was world famous for the atlases and maps printed by their family business in Amsterdam. The Republic was enjoying its Golden Age and Amsterdam was steadily growing as a centre of international trade, overseas expansion and wealth. Such a town provided the international contacts, the financial resources and the market for starting a thriving printing business in maps and atlases. Not only were there sufficient mariners and merchants who needed reliable navigation tools, also many wealthy members of the bourgeoisie appeared to be curious about the world beyond the horizon. They were prepared to pay for luxury editions of atlases or beautiful globes of the earth and the heavens.

This was not a completely new market. In the last decades of the sixteenth century, based on examples from abroad, cartographers in Enkhuizen and Edam had searched for suitable maps for mariners and other interested citizens. Willem Janszoon Blaeu responded to this demand, making good use of his knowledge of the subject and sound business instincts.

After an apprenticeship with the famous Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, Blaeu set up a printer’s and publishing house in Amsterdam. His first printed maps date from 1605 and he distinguished himself from the outset by the quality and innovations in his work. Blaeu did not go out to take measurements himself. He designed his maps based on existing cartographic
material, supplemented by the knowledge he drew from ships’ logs, travel journals and talks with mariners. His maps and atlases gained Blaeu an international reputation.

After his death in 1638, his son Joan took over the business. Joan expanded the family business still further and published numerous new maps and atlases, including the renowned *Atlas Major*, that was brought onto the market from 1662 onwards in various editions and languages. This multi-volume atlas maps the known world of the time in six hundred maps and several thousand pages of descriptions. The atlas illustrated how knowledge of the world had been increased by voyages of discovery and trade contacts. At the same time, the atlas was a desirable status symbol, printed in folio format and bound in expensive leather if so desired. The maps themselves were beautifully printed but seldom original. Often, they had been published previously, sometimes they were outdated and they were largely inaccurate. However, all this had hardly any effect on the esteem in which the atlas was held. With his *Atlas Major* Blaeu had brought the known world within hands’ reach in the loveliest way possible.

Sub-topics

**Primary education sector**

Shipping and navigation  
The travel journal of Gerrit de Veer (Nova Zembla)  
Learning to work with maps and atlases

**Secondary education sector**

Overseas expansion  
Printing for the market  
Famous cartographers abroad

**Past and Present**

Google earth  
Satellite navigation  
The market price of a Blaeu atlas

**In the Treasure Chest**

Facsimile of the *Atlas major*  
Navigation instruments

References

**Places to Go**

Amsterdam: Maritime Museum  
Amsterdam: Amsterdam Historical Museum

**Books for young people**

P. Visser, *Heemskerck op Nova Zembla*

**Background literature**

Kees Zandvliet, *Mapping for money: Maps, plans and topographic paintings and their role in Dutch overseas expansion during the 16th and 17th centuries*, Amsterdam 2002.

**Websites**

www.scheepvaartmuseum.nl  
www.uba.uva.nl (database of images of maps and atlases > Blaeu)  
www.cultuurwijzer.nl (search for “cartography”)