

GERARDUS MERCATOR
1512-1594

Gerardus Mercator, or Gerard Kremer as he was called originally, was born on 5 March 1512 in Rupelmonde in Flanders. He entered the University of Louvain in 1530 (at that time latinizing his name), studied philosophy and theology, but switched to mathematics and astronomy after graduating. Gemma Frisius was his tutor. Mercator also acquired some skills in engraving. His first globe dates from 1536 and the following year he published his first map (of Palestine). During his stay at Louvain, which ended in 1552, he also produced maps of the world, other globes and scientific instruments. In 1544 he was accused of heresy and was imprisoned for some months. For lack of evidence he was released, but in 1552 he decided it was better to leave Louvain. He emigrated to the German city of Duisburg, where he became a cartographer to the Duke of Cleves.

Mercator's years at Duisburg proved to be very fruitful. He produced maps of several European countries and edited a new and improved edition of Ptolemy. In 1569, in a map of the world especially designed for sailors, he introduced his most important contribution to cartography, the projection that still bears his name. His cylindrical projection, which shows loxodromes (rhumb lines) as straight lines, made it possible for seamen to lay out their course very easily.

During the last years of his life, Mercator designed, engraved and published a large collection of very detailed and accurate maps of western and southern Europe.

Mercator died on 2 December 1594 in Duisburg. A year after his death his son Rumold published his maps of Europe as *Atlas, or Cosmographic meditations on the structure of the world*. It was the first time the word *atlas* was used to designate a collection of maps.

Primary works

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[K.v.B.]