

GEOGRAPHY

Joseph Glanvill (1636–1680)

1668

In this the ancients were exceedingly defective. And Aristotle knew the world by the same figure his scholar conquered it. 'Tis noted by the ingenious Varenius¹ that the most general and necessary things in this science were then unknown—as the habitableness of the torrid zone, the flux and reflux of the sea, the diversity of winds, the polar property of the magnet, the true dimension of the Earth. They wanted description of remote countries, concerning which both the Greeks and Romans had very fabulous relations. They knew not that the Earth was encompassed by the sea and might be sailed round. They were totally ignorant of America, and both the north and south parts of this hemisphere; yea, and understood very little of the remoter places of their own Asia.

Japan, the Javas, the Philippines, and Borneo were either not at all known or exceeding imperfectly of old; but all these are familiar to the latter times. Mexico and Peru, and the vast regions of those mighty empires, with the many isles of the Great Sea, are disclosed. The frozen north, the torrid line, and formerly unknown south are visited and by their numerous inhabitants found not to be so inhospitable and unkind to men as Antiquity believed. The Earth has been rounded by Magellan, Drake, and Cavendish.² The great motion of the sea is vulgar and its varieties inquiring every day. The diversities of winds stated and better understood. The treasure of hidden virtues in the loadstone found and used. The spicy islands of the east, as also those of the remote south and north, frequented and the knowledge of that people and those countries transmitted to us, with their riches. The most distant parts travelled and described. Our navigation is far greater, our commerce is more general, our charts more exact, our globes more accurate, our travels more remote, our reports more intelligent and sincere. And, consequently, our geography far more perfect than it was in the elder times of Polybius and Possidonius; yea, than in those of Ptolemy, Strabo, and Pomponius Mela, who lived among the Caeasars.

And if it was so short in the flourishing times of the Roman Empire, how was it before, in the days of Aristotle and the Grecians? We have an instance of it in the great Macedonian, who thought the bounds of his conquests to be the end of the world when there were nations enough beyond them to have eaten up the conqueror with his proud and triumphant armies. So that here also modern improvements have been great; and you will think so if you compare the geographical performances of Gemma Frisius, Mercator, Ortelius, Stevinus, Bertius, and William Blaeu³ with the best remains of the most celebrated geographers of the more ancient ages.

Joseph Glanvill, *Plus Ultra* (London: 1668):48–50.

¹ Bernhardus Varenius (1622–1650), German geographer

² Ferdinand Magellan (c. 1480–1521), Sir Francis Drake (1540–1596), and Sir Thomas Cavendish (1560–1592)

³ Gemma Frisius (1508–1555), Gerardus Mercator (1512–1594), Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598), Simon Stevin (1548–1620), Peter Bertius (1565–1629), and William Blaeu (1571–1638)