

How the atlas got its name



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The 'Atlas' got its name from the geographer and cartographer, Gerardus Mercator in the **sixteenth century**. When he published his first book of maps in 1595, Mercator chose the term 'atlas' from the Greek Titan Atlas, but Mercator's choice has resulted in a misunderstanding.

According to Greek mythology, the Titan Atlas lives at the very western end of the known Earth – the western end of the Mediterranean Sea. (Perhaps because the Atlas Mountains are in north-west Africa and 'Atlantic Ocean' means 'the sea of Atlas'.)

Following the defeat of the Titans in a battle with the Olympians, the Greek God, Zeus, condemned Atlas to 'hold up the celestial sphere for eternity' as a punishment.

Because Mercator named his collection of maps after Atlas, people got the impression that the Titan Atlas held up the Earth and various artists have incorrectly portrayed Atlas in this way.

Nowadays, we think of Atlas carrying the world. This is where the phrase to 'carry the weight of the world [on your shoulders]' comes from. In fact, Atlas should be shown holding up the celestial sphere (or heavens).

Find out more about Gerardus Mercator and other mapmakers throughout history, such as Max Eckert, James Gall, John Paul Goode and Arno Peters.