

# BRIEFE ÜBER KALABRIEN UND SIZILIEN (TEIL 1): REISE VON NEAPEL BIS REGGIO IN KALABRIEN (LETTERS ABOUT CALABRIA AND SICILY (PART 1): JOURNEY FROM NAPLES TO REGGIO IN CALABRIA)

Johann Heinrich Bartels

Analysis by Chiara Cernicchiaro

Travelogue, First-Person Account, Essay

*Briefe über Kalabrien und Sizilien* is a travelogue by Johann Heinrich Bartels, published in 1791. In the first volume, Bartels recounts his travels through Calabria in the aftermath of the 1783 earthquake. Combining Enlightenment inquiry with moral reflection, he intertwines geological upheaval with social criticism, and describes the catastrophe as both a scientific phenomenon and a catalyst for reform.

Year of Publication	1791
Publication Place	Göttingen
Editor	Dieterich
Entity	1783 Calabrian earthquakes
Collection	Briefe über Kalabrien und Sizilien

## GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

### Earthquake 1783 Calabrian earthquakes

REAL EVENT

Time	Mainshock: February 5, 1783, 12:00 (local time)
Location	Calabria and Sicily Italy
Coordinates	38.292751, 15.984764
Impacted Areas	Calabria and east Sicily
Seismic Fault	Calabrian Arc
Magnitude	6.5-7 Mw

Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
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Source: Giuffrida et al

Anthropization Level	Cities	Towns	Churches	Cultural Heritage Sites	Agriculture Areas	Farming Areas
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Ecological Impacts	Physical Landscape Changes
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The most dramatic effects involved the terrain: there were massive landslides, collapses, slips, and detachments of large portions of land, as well as liquefaction phenomena. The impact was particularly devastating on the northern slopes of the Aspromonte and in the Gitoia Tauro Plain: entire hills collapsed and plunged into the valleys below, in some cases dragging entire villages with them. Landslides blocked numerous watercourses, leading to the formation of lakes. (Bernardini and Meletti)

### Tsunami

The shocks of February 5 and 6 triggered a tsunami, with large waves striking extensive stretches of coastline. In particular, the Tyrrhenian coast between Scilla and Bagnara Calabria was hit by the catastrophic seaquake that followed the second, powerful shock, which occurred during the night between February 5 and 6. Contemporary historical sources (Sarconi [1784] and Vivenzio [1788]) report a wave between 6 and 8 meters high that overwhelmed the boats, huts, and tents sheltering the population of Scilla, who had taken refuge on the beach after the quake of the previous day (Bernardini and Meletti)

### Soil Changes

The most dramatic effects involved the terrain: there were massive landslides, collapses, slips, and detachments of large portions of land, as well as liquefaction phenomena (Bernardini and Meletti)

## Social Impacts

### Deaths

According to the official estimates of the Vicar General of the King of Naples, the total number of victims in Calabria was nearly 30,000 (1,300 in Scilla alone due to the tsunami), with additional casualties in Sicily (at least 700 in Messina alone) (Bernardini and Meletti)

### Injuries

### Poverty

As a consequence of the seismic sequence, which lasted for more than three years, thousands more people died in the following years due to famine, disease, and hardship (approximately 5,000) (Bernardini and Meletti)

### Destruction Of Public Buildings

A total of 182 towns were completely razed to the ground. (Bernardini and Meletti)

### Forced Relocation

### Resource Depletion

Dozens of villages were abandoned and rebuilt in different locations. (Bernardini and Meletti)

### Diseases

As a consequence of the seismic sequence, which lasted for more than three years, thousands more people died in the following years due to famine, disease, and hardship (approximately 5,000) (Bernardini and Meletti); The seismic events also shook the very foundations of the existing social order, which had already shown signs of crisis, leading to public unrest and the spread of epidemics (CFTI5Med)

### Trauma

The continuous recurrence of seismic events, some of considerable intensity, caused the initial panic to turn into a true state of psychosis. (CFTI5)

### Social Disruption

The seismic events also shook the very foundations of the existing social order, which had already shown signs of crisis, leading to public unrest and the spread of epidemics. (CFTI5Med)

## Earthquake 1783 Calabrian earthquakes

LITERARY EVENT

Time	Mainshock: February 5, 1783, 12:00 (local time)
Location	Calabria Italy
Coordinates	38.292751, 15.984764
Impacted Areas	South Calabria and east Sicily
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Seismic Fault	Calabrian Arc
Magnitude	6.5-7 Mw
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Houses Country Houses Agriculture Areas Towns Churches Slums Sea Coast Villages Cities

## Ecological Impacts

Physical Landscape Changes Atmospheric Changes Soil Changes Tsunami

## Social Impacts

Deaths Injuries Resource Depletion Destruction Of Public Buildings Trauma Poverty Diseases Depopulation Relocation

## INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS &amp; AFFECTS

## Reactions

Name	The Prior Of The Carmelite Convent Of Jerocarne
Gender	Male
Reactions	Paralysis Panic Terror

Name	Vincenzo Greco
Gender	Male
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Escape Fight For Survival

Name	Michele Roviri
Gender	Male
Reactions	Fight For Survival Survival Instinct Underestimation

Name	Paolo Felia
Gender	Male
Reactions	Escape Fight For Survival

Name	A Mother From Polistena
Gender	Female
Reactions	Heroism

Name	Don Antonio Russo
Gender	Male
Reactions	Solidarity Cooperation Heroism

Name	Pasqualina Nata
Gender	Female
Reactions	Solidarity Cooperation Heroism

Name	Aloisa Basili
Age	15
Gender	Female
Reactions	Fight For Survival Survival Instinct Madness Heroism Trauma Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Name	The Old Prince Of Scilla
Gender	Male
Native Place	Scilla

## COLLECTIVE REACTIONS &amp; AFFECTS

## Affects/Reactions

Name	The population
Reactions	Passiveness Solidarity Escape Heroism

Name	Politicians
Reactions	Intervention Solidarity Pragmatism Disorder Rationality

Name	Nobles
Reactions	Hindrance Self-Absorption Pragmatism

## Group Attitudes

Name	The population
Reactions	Awareness Rationality Superstition

## LINGUISTIC &amp; STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

## Keywords

"Die Traurige Erdrevolution" 'The Sad Earth Upheaval' (Bartels Preface, 9; My Trans.)

"Die Schrecklichen Naturbegebenheiten" 'The Terrifying Natural Events' (Bartels, 5; My Trans.)

"Ein Menschenelend" 'A Human Misery' (5; My Trans.)

"Das Schreckliche Erdbeben" 'The Terrible Earthquake' (43; My Trans.)

"Die Fürchterliche Erdrevolution" 'The Terrible Upheaval Of The Earth' (49; My Trans.)

"Die Revolution" 'The Upheaval' (37; My Trans.)

"Der Wütende Wellenschlag [Des Meeres]" 'The Raging Surge Of The Sea' (321; My Trans.)

## Metaphors

"eine Empörung der Erde" 'an outrage of the earth' (Bartels 5; my trans.)

"in ihr Nichts zurückgeschleudern" 'to hurl back in its nothingness' (5; my trans.)

"das traurige Schicksal von 1783" 'the sad fate of 1783' (58; my trans.)

"mehr denn 40000 Menschen wurden ein Raub des schrecklichsten Todes" 'More than 400,000 people became a prey to the most terrible death' (305; my trans.)

"Pizzo war eben in seiner Blüte, wie es wieder bis zur Wurzel abgehauen ward, aus der izt ein neuer Keim aufwach." 'Pizzo was just in its prime when it was once again cut down to the root, from which now a new sprout is emerging' (324; my trans.)

"beinah ein Drittel der Einwoner erlag unter der Sichel des Todes" 'Almost a third of the inhabitants perished under the scythe of death.' (325; my trans.)

"Wie uns unser großes Unglück traf, sagte Einer, war es finstre Nacht." 'When our great misfortune struck us, someone said, it was a dark night.' (348; my trans.)

"ein fürchterliches Gemurmel im Innern des Meers" 'a dreadful rumbling inside the sea' (414; my trans.)

## Similes

"[die Erde] bewegte sich wie ein Schiff von tobenden Wellen bewegt wird" '[The earth] moved like a ship is moved by raging waves' (Bartels 307; my trans.)

"und [die Erde] schloß sich schnell wieder, gleich einem unter ihm ausgebreiteten Fallstricke, dem er mühsam seinen Fuß zu entziehen strebte" 'and quickly closed again, like a snare spread out beneath him, from which he struggled to withdraw his foot' (307)

"Die ganze Gegend gleicht einem schönen Mädchen, das über den Tod ihres treuverbundnen Geliebten trauert." 'The whole region resembles a beautiful girl mourning the death of her faithfully devoted lover.' (330, my trans.)

Syntax	Hypotaxis, Complex Noun Phrases, Parataxis, Unconventional Position, High Frequency Connectives, Complex Verbal Phrases
Punctuation	Multiple Commas, Dashes
Morphology	High Frequency Passive Forms

## Johann Heinrich Bartels and the *Erdrevolution* of 1783: A Journey through the Ruins in Calabria

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### Introduction

*Briefe über Kalabrien und Sizilien* (Letters about Calabria and Sicily) is a two-volume travelogue by the German scholar and politician Johann Heinrich Bartels (1761-1850). The work consists of two volumes. In the first volume, titled *Erster Teil: Reise von Neapel bis Reggio in Kalabrien* (Part 1: Journey from Naples to Reggio in Calabria), the author narrates his journey through the region of Calabria, three years after the disastrous 1783 earthquakes.

### The 1783 earthquakes in Calabria and Sicily

The 1783 Calabria earthquake was one of the most destructive earthquakes in the history of southern Italy. The first shock occurred on February 5, 1783, at 12:00 (local time) with a magnitude of 7.10 Mw, and it was followed by an intense seismic swarm that devastated southern Calabria and the north east of Sicily. The most affected area was the Southern Calabrian Arc, between the Catanzaro Basin and the Strait of Messina (Andrenacci et al.).

The strongest aftershocks occurred on February 6 and 7, and again on March 1 and 28 of the same year. The earthquakes also triggered two intense tsunamis, on February 5 and 6, which struck the Sicilian coast between Messina and Torre Faro, and the Calabrian coast between Scilla and Cenidio. These tsunamis caught by surprise and killed many inhabitants who had fled to the beaches seeking refuge from the earthquakes (Cugliari et al.).

The seismic sequence destroyed more than 180 localities, where over 30,000 people died, and caused a geomorphological crisis that reshaped the Aspromonte and Serre Mountains, triggering ground fractures, landslides, liquefaction, river course changes, and the formation of numerous lakes (Andrenacci et al 13). The seismic sequence lasted over three years, and even in the following years, around 5,000 more people died due to famine, disease, and hardship (Bernardini and Meletti). News of the first three earthquakes and the resulting massive devastation took about ten days to reach Naples, at the time the capital of the Kingdom to which Calabria belonged (Bernardini and Meletti). King Ferdinand IV of Bourbon quickly appointed Count Francesco Pignatelli as Viceroy of Calabria to coordinate emergency aid and try to oversee the long reconstruction process. The Bourbon government also sent a scientific expedition from the Royal Academy of Sciences and Fine Arts of Naples to conduct observations and research. This mission led to the publication of Michele Sarconi's important monograph *Istoria de' fenomeni del tremuoto avvenuto nelle Calabrie e nel Valdemone nell'anno 1783, posta in luce dalla Reale Accademia delle Scienze e delle Belle Lettere di Napoli* in 1784. The other major work dedicated to the earthquakes is Giovanni Vivenzio's monograph *Istoria de' tremuoti avvenuti nella Provincia della Calabria Ulteriore, e nella città di Messina nell'anno 1783. E di quanto nella Calabria fu fatto per lo suo risorgimento fino al 1787. Preceduta da una teoria, ed istoria generale de' tremuoti, published in 1788*.

The seismic swarm had a significant social impact on the Kingdom of Naples and on Italian and European history as a whole. In 1784, the *Cassa Sacra* was established: more specifically, the *Giunta della Cassa Sacra* was a governmental body created in the province of Calabria Ulteriore with the aim of expropriating ecclesiastical property and reinvesting it in the reconstruction of towns and cities devastated by the earthquakes.

The catastrophic scale of the disaster also prompted the Bourbon government to consider the need for a broad reform of Calabria's housing system (Bernardini and Meletti). For the first time, entire towns and cities such as Reggio Calabria, Mileto, and Messina had been completely redesigned according to new urban planning regulations. The *Istruzioni Reali*, promulgated by the government in 1784, can be considered one of the earliest attempts in continental Europe to introduce anti-seismic building regulations.

The extensive literature that was published shortly after the 1783 earthquakes reflects the deep impact the disaster had on southern Italian society and European culture. Scientists conducted unprecedented field studies to explore competing theories on the origin of earthquakes. Calabrian and Neapolitan intellectuals used the reconstruction efforts as a platform to advocate for broader economic and housing reforms. Numerous travel accounts, reports, and literary testimonies by both foreign and local observers also contributed to the rich and historically significant corpus (Guidoboni et al.). Among these accounts there are the reports written by the Englishman William Hamilton for the Royal Society and by the French geologist Dédat de Dolomieu. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe also described the devastating effects of the earthquake on the city of Messina in his *Italienische Reise (Italian Journey)*. Through their observations, the earthquakes of 1783 entered the broader discourse of Enlightenment science and literature.

## Johann Heinrich Bartels and his journey after the earthquake

Among the intellectuals and scholars who took an interest in the 1783 earthquakes was the German Johann Heinrich Bartels (1761-1850), a politician, future mayor of Hamburg, and a Freemason since 1780. In 1786, Bartels undertook a journey to Italy, choosing to depart from Naples and travel through the regions devastated by the earthquake, namely Calabria and Sicily. His aim was distinctly Enlightenment-inspired: he viewed earthquake-stricken Calabria as fertile ground for a political and social laboratory (Scamardi, Introduction). Bartels recorded his impressions and observations in his two-volume work *Briefe über Kalabrien und Sizilien* (Letters about Calabria and Sicily), published in 1791. The first volume, titled *Reise von Neapel bis Reggio in Kalabrien* (Journey from Naples to Reggio in Calabria), is dedicated to the destruction the autor witnessed in the region.

In the very first letter, Bartels clearly states his motivations for the journey (Scamardi). The first reason is anthropological: Bartels wants to understand how Calabria – once a cradle of civilization especially during *Magna Graecia* – could have fallen into such deep cultural and social decay. The second reason concerns the earthquake itself. As he writes, “In Zweiter war: die schrecklichen Naturbegebenheiten, bei denen durch eine Empörung der Erde hundertjährige Werke der Menschen, auf einmal in ihr Nichts zurückgeschleudert, und Nationen in einem schrecklichen Momente unter dem Schutt ihrer stolzen Arbeiten begraben werden, näher kennen zu lernen.” ‘The second was: to gain a deeper understanding of the terrifying natural events in which, through an upheaval of the earth, century-old human achievements are suddenly hurled back into nothingness, and entire nations are buried in a dreadful moment beneath the rubble of their proud creations.’ (Bartels 5-6; my trans.) His third motive is to investigate the origins of the widespread prejudices against Calabria. Through his journey, Bartels combines scientific curiosity with a critical and moral reflection on nature, civilization, and social injustice.

### Linguistic and thematic analysis

The work is written in epistolary form and consists of eleven letters that Bartels imagines addressing to a friend, who appears throughout the narrative under the abbreviation “m. F.” (*mein Freund* ‘my friend’) and is addressed using the formal *Sie* (“You”) German pronoun, in keeping with the conventions of polite correspondence at the time. As Scamardi notes in the introduction to the Italian edition, this writing style was the standard for travel literature between the 17th and 18th centuries. It allows the narrative to unfold along a clear spatial and temporal axis, making it easier for the reader to follow the progress of the journey.

Moreover, the epistolary form helps maintain the reader’s attention by skipping over parts the author considers less engaging, while instead allowing for digressions he finds more stimulating. As a result, reading the text gives the impression of accompanying Bartels step by step and town by town on his journey from Naples to Reggio Calabria.

Bartels’s style continuously blends narrative elements with more essayistic passages, frequently interrupting the account with historical and scientific digressions. However, his lexical choices are far from formal: rather than employing dry, technical language, Bartels enriches his writing with creative expressions, often resorting to metaphors and hyperbole to convey the earthquake’s force and its dramatic effects.

As an equivalent of “earthquake,” the author almost always uses the modern term “Erdbeben” (12). Bartels also employs compounds such as “Erderschütterung” ‘earth tremor’ and “Erdrevolution” ‘revolution of the earth’ (49; my trans.). The latter term is no longer in use today, but it appears in some contemporary texts of Bartels’ time and is absent from the DWDS corpus until 1786, after which it disappears entirely around 1910 (DWDS frequency curve for *Erdrevolution*). Sometimes, only the root of the compound appears in the text, as in the nominal group “die traurige Revolution” ‘the sad revolution’ (Bartels 299; my trans.).

The earthquake is described using adjectives such as “schrecklich” ‘terrible’ (43; my trans.), “fürchterlich” ‘terrible’ (49; my trans.) or “unglücklich” ‘unfortunate’ (364; my trans.). Various metaphors in the text refer to the earthquake, including “Empörung der Erde” ‘upheaval of the earth’ (5; my trans.), “das große Unglück” ‘the great misfortune’ (348; my trans.) and “das traurige Schicksal von 1783” ‘the sad fate of 1783’ (58; my trans.). Furthermore, there are several references to the devastating tsunamis triggered by the earthquake and resulting landslides, as in the metaphor “ein fürchterliches Gemurmel im Innern des Meers” ‘a dreadful rumbling inside the sea’ (414; my trans.).

The effects on the Calabrian territory are described using verbs such as “erschüttern” ‘to shake’ (299-300; my trans.), “zerstören” ‘to destroy’ (12; my trans.), “zerrüttten” ‘to wreck’ (405; my trans.) as well as support verb constructions like “in Ruinen liegen” ‘to lie in ruins’ (299; my trans.), its variant “in Ruinen zerfallen” ‘to crumble in ruins’ (360; my trans.) and participles in predicative function such as “die Stadt ist völlig ruinirt” ‘the city is completely ruined’ (346; my trans.). Several nouns also convey devastation, including “Verwüstung” ‘devastation’ (299; my trans.) or “Zerstörung” ‘destruction’ (338; my trans.). The despair of the inhabitants is captured by the compound “Menschenelend” ‘human misery’ (5; my trans.) and the loss of life by the metaphors “beinah ein Drittel der Einwoner erlag unter der Sichel des Todes” ‘Almost a third of the inhabitants perished under the scythe of death.’ (325; my trans.) and “ein Raub des schrecklichsten Todes” ‘More than 400,000 people became a prey to the most terrible death’ (302; my trans.). The buildings in Nicastro have become mere “Barakken” ‘barracks’ (293; my trans.) which Bartels compare through a simile to “Schweinstallen” ‘pigsties’ (293; my trans.). The author also enriches his account with auditory imagery. In Pizzo Calabro it is possible to hear “die Klagen der Einwoner über den Verlust ihrer Weiber und Kinder, ihrer Väter und Freunde” ‘the lamentation of the inhabitants over the loss of their wives and children, their fathers and friends’ (285; my trans.) and in Scilla a “Klageschrei” ‘howl of sorrow’ (412; my trans.).

Regarding syntax and punctuation, Bartels’ style is complex. The text features numerous hypotactic constructions, as well as paratactic ones, linked asyndetically or through coordinating conjunctions such as *denn* ‘because’, *oder* ‘or’, and *und* ‘and’, as

in the following example:

Sie wissen, der 5te Februar im Jar 1783 war der erste traurige Zeitpunkt, der Verwüstung über diesen Erdstrich brachte. Unerwartet brach sie ein; denn alle Zeichen auf der Erde und in der Luft waren entweder nicht sichre Vorzeichen eines kommenden Erdbebens, oder wenn sie es waren, so gingen sie so unmittelbar der Erderschütterung her, dass die Menschen an Rettung nicht mehr denken konnten.

(302)

You know, the 5th of February in the year 1783 was the first tragic moment that brought devastation to this region. It struck unexpectedly, for all the signs on earth and in the air were either not reliable indicators of an impending earthquake, or if they were, they occurred so shortly before the tremor that people had no time to think of escape.

(my trans.)

A recognisable characteristic of Bartels' style is the frequent placement in *Vorfeld* 'pre-field' (the part of the sentence that comes before the finite verb in verb-second sentences) of those syntactic constituents that would typically be found at the right periphery of the *Mittelfeld* 'middle-field' (also by the end of the sentence). This gives the sentence structure – and the text as a whole – a more poetic and dramatic tone.

The choice of which constituent to place in the *Vorfeld* is typically defined in German by the distribution of information within the sentence, which in turn is influenced by the broader textual context (Wöllstein *et al.* 56-57). At the beginning of a text, frame-setting adverbials indicating aspects such as time, place, or the speaker's perspective, often occupy the *Vorfeld* or at beginning of the *Mittelfeld*. As the text progresses, this position is typically filled by constituents that either refer back to previously mentioned elements (e.g., through pro-forms) or contrast with them, thereby contributing to textual coherence. For this reason, the *Vorfeld* is often occupied by the subject or by non obligatory adverbial constituents that help to structure the discourse.

In his work, Bartel places in *Vorfeld* different kinds of syntactic constituents: a) parts of the verbal complex, such as in "*Entschieden ist es*" 'it is decided' (Bartels 1; my trans.); b) direct objects, such as in "*Die Täler, die hier zwischen den Bergen hervorblitzen*, [...], fand ich sehr reich an Schaafe" 'The valleys that open up here between the mountains [...] I found to be very rich in sheep' (272; my trans.); c) obligatory predicatives, such as in "*Nicht weniger interessant werden Ihnen einige Beweise von langer und sonderbarer Erhaltung unter dem Schutte Vergrabener sein*" 'No less interesting to you will be the evidence of the long and strange preservation of those buried beneath the rubble' (310; my trans.), "*sonderbar wars aber*" 'but it was strange' (27; my trans.); d) free predicatives, such as in "*Ungeduldig sehe ich dem Augenblikme meiner Abreise entgegen*" 'I am looking forward impatiently to the moment of my departure' (2; my trans.), "*froh kletterten wir beim Erwachen eines heitern Tages unter den trefflichen Aussichten über Berg und Tal*" 'Gladly we climbed, upon waking to a bright day, beneath the splendid views over mountain and valley' (287; my trans.); e) obligatory adverbials, such as in "*In einem Lande, [...] kann immer, [...], eine solche Unwissenheit, [...], leicht stattfinden*" 'In a country, [...] such ignorance can always, [...], easily occur' (8; my trans.).

The *Vorfeld* is often occupied by secondary sentences: "*sowol in der Gegend die wir bereits verlassen hatten, als auch in der Plaine vor uns, sah ich hie und da einsame Ruinen*" 'Both in the area we had already left and in the plain before us, I saw here and there solitary ruins.' (227; my trans.).

Several *topoi* and mythogems recur throughout Bartels' work, most notably the themes of lost civilization (specifically that of *Magna Graecia*), superstition, and prophecy.

The topos of the destruction of civilization appears frequently in the narrative, as in the following passage: "hundertjaerige Werke der Menschen, auf einmal in ihr Nichts zurückgeschleudert, und Nationen in einem schreklichen Momente unter dem Schutt ihrer stolzen Arbeiten begraben werden." 'century-old human achievements are suddenly hurled back into nothingness, and entire nations are buried in a dreadful moment beneath the rubble of their proud creations.' (5; my trans.).

In the true spirit of the Enlightenment, Bartels often comments critically on the superstitions of the local population, dismissing them as mere nonsense and unfounded beliefs:

Es scheint übrigens als lagen noch Kräfte in den Menschen, bis zu deren Enkstehungsquelle hin, bis izk das Auge des scharfsinnigsten Psychologen nicht hat dringen können; und unter diese gehört das Vermögen der Vorahndüng, oder der Vorempsindung zufälliger, künftiger Dinge, bei nicht erhizter Einbildungskraft. Alle die Hokus Pokus der Somnambuleurs rind ihrer Lehrer lassen sich bis izt noch wol, soviel ich glaube, durch Erhizung der Einbildungskraft, Anstrengung der geschwächten Nerven, und Reiz des Zeugungstribers, erklären.

(417)

"Incidentally, it seems that there are still forces within human beings whose origin remains hidden, forces that not even the eye of the most perceptive psychologist has been able to penetrate. Among these is the ability of presentiment or fore-feeling of accidental future events, occurring without an overexcited imagination. All the hocus-pocus of the somnambulists and their teachers, as far as I believe, can still be explained up to now by the excitation of the imagination, strain on weakened nerves, and the stimulation of the sexual drive."

(my trans.)

A significant aspect of Bartels's work is his effort to offer a vivid depiction of the 1783 tragedy by incorporating individual stories from people of all social classes and backgrounds. He recounts episodes involving workers, artisans, members of the clergy, the nobility, women, children, and even newborns, showing how the devastation affected every layer of society without distinction. These portraits are never generic: Bartels describes Calabrian people accurately, often reporting their words, emotional reactions, and personal losses. In doing so, he brings the reader closer to the human dimension of the disaster, moving beyond a simple account of physical destruction.

## Conclusion

The work of Johann Heinrich Bartels titled *Briefe über Kalabrien und Sizilien* is more than just a travelogue. It is a reflection on the strength of nature, on society, and the fragility of civilization in the aftermath of catastrophe. From the perspective of an Enlightened thinker, Bartels offers vivid descriptions and critical commentary about the 1783 earthquakes. Not only does he describe them as devastating natural disasters, but he also sees them as key events for social analysis. Indeed, they offer him – and his readers – a chance to reflect on different groups of human beings, such as poorer people at the mercy of events, wealthy individuals whose money cannot change their fate, and the delays of politicians in intervening. Bartels does not find traces of the ancient Greek people in Calabria, but sees the telluric disaster as an opportunity for improvement. He is the first to experience a process of improvement: during his journey, he gradually overcomes his prejudices against the Calabrians, and begins to admire their human and social qualities.

Bartel's fictional letters are a testimony to his intercultural position and writing. His use of figures of speech and complex syntax adds a poetic and dramatic tone to the narrative, while the epistolary form allows for both structure and personal reflection. In this work, Bartels situates Calabria within broader European debates on science, reform, and modernity. Ultimately, his account serves as a powerful historical testimony that combines scientific observation with human empathy, contributing meaningfully to the cultural memory of one of Italy's most devastating events.

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