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"Divine Punishment or Object of Research? The Resonance of Earthquakes, Floods, Epidemics and Famine in the Correspondence Network of Albrecht von Haller"

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The Enlightenment is a starting point for our current understanding of natural disasters. The present investigation examines the resonance of such catastrophes in the correspondence network of the universal scholar Albrecht von Haller (1708–77). In this European system of communication there is a very rapid exchange of widely dispersed individual observations and an intensive discussion about competing interpretations. Poetic, philosophical, scientific and administrative approaches overlap rather than contradict one another. A main topic is the earthquake of Lisbon 1755, with the important role of Voltaire, who embodied the Enlightenment like no other and who was the greatest ideological antipode of Haller. Although earthquakes are the main focus of attention, some comparison is made with letters discussing cattle diseases, plagues, famines and floods.

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