

Paper Number: 4251

Goethe, geology and polemics on a new science

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In the later years of his life Johann Wolfgang von Goethe vigorously rejected revolutionary change in nature and politics. He had come to hold a unique position in the era of Romanticism, revolution and reaction, thanks to his place in the court life of Saxe-Weimar, the small Duchy that was for a time the intellectual centre of a politically fragmented Germany. In the 1770s, when he first turned himself to the study of the earth, those who devoted themselves to the natural sciences were counted as natural historians, natural philosophers or simply philosophers. By the final decade of his life the new and ever more specialized sciences were making their mark, including geology as practiced by Charles Lyell, Leopold von Buch, Alexander von Humboldt and Léonce Élie de Beaumont. Goethe found his scientific views marginalized, and this was reflected in his polemics against catastrophist geology, polemics that in important respects mirrored his earlier attack on Newton's theory of colours. Goethe's polemics should not, however, be understood simply as the frustration of a person whose views have fallen out of fashion, for they also suggest a sociological explanation of the changing social structure of science in the early nineteenth century.

