

The Earth in Fleeting Motion



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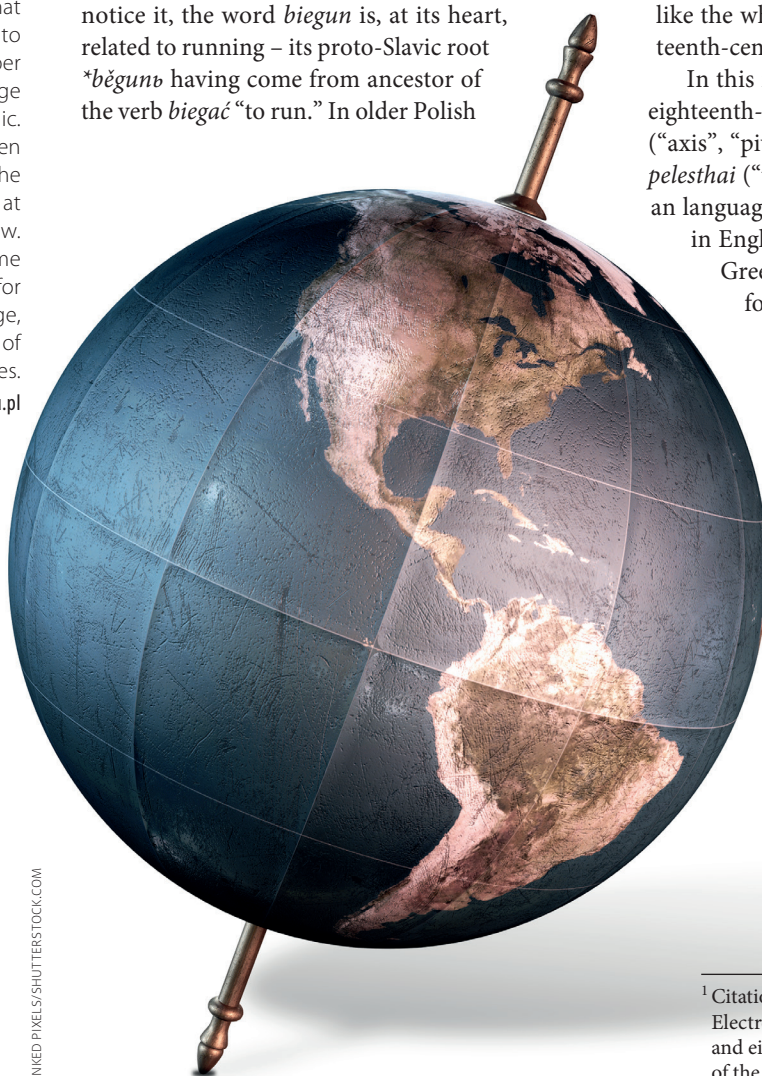
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The body and soul are the poles of the human being” – this is an example that a dictionary of the Polish language from the early twentieth century cites to illustrate the meaning of the word *biegun* “pole”. Here, *bieguny* “poles” are understood as two mutually opposed extremes, as the endpoints of something – like the distant ends of the Earth: the North and South Pole (*biegun północny i południowy*). Interestingly, however, this focus on extremeness has nowadays largely eclipsed what originally inspired the use of the word *biegun* to name the farthest-flung points of the Earth: the concept of motion. Although everyday speakers of Polish probably do not notice it, the word *biegun* is, at its heart, related to running – its proto-Slavic root **bĕgunъ* having come from ancestor of the verb *biegać* “to run.” In older Polish

(and other Slavic languages) *biegun* denoted a “runner” – in the sense of both someone who runs, and a device for imparting motion (a trace of this meaning is still evident in contemporary Polish in the term *konik na biegunach*, lit. “a pony on runners” – Polish for “rocking-horse”). And so, the two extreme points on the Earth, to the distant north and south, were in ancient times thought to be the pivot responsible for the Earth’s motion: “The Earth’s axis, or diameter, is the line drawn by the imagination through the center of the Earth and continued out to the Celestial poles [*bieguny*], it is the Celestial axle around which the whole starry Heavens perform a daily revolution, like the wheel of a cart around its axle” – an eighteenth-century textbook of geography explains.¹

In this meaning, the word *biegun* is actually an eighteenth-century calque from the Greek noun *pólos* (“axis”, “pivot of the Earth”) derived from the verb *pelesthai* (“to move, to become”). Different European languages calqued or borrowed the term (e.g. as in English *pole*) as equivalents to the Greek the Greek *pólos arktikós* and *pólos antartikós*. Before the eighteenth century, Polish speakers would have used the word *biegun* to refer to someone on the move: to a vagrant or vagabond, a nomad or someone fleeing. This also crops up in contemporary Polish: consider the title of Nobel Prize laureate Olga Tokarczyk’s novel *Beguni* (published in Jennifer Croft’s prize-winning translation, entitled “Flights”), a deep meditation on the sense of travel and motion. Ultimately, we might conclude that it was quite a distance that the word *biegun* had to travel in its wanderings before ultimately making it to the very ends of the Earth. ■



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¹ Citation by Wojciech Bystrzonowski, found in the Electronic Corpus of Polish Texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (through 1772), PAS Institute of the Polish Language, www.korba.edu.pl.