The Storm God and the Hunter: A Fragment of an Old Balto-Slavic Epos?

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A comparison of a group of Lithuanian, Polish, and Russian legends implying a thunderous character, with a passage from the *Mahābhārata*, an ancient Indian epos, allows us to reconstruct a fragment of the myth of the Baltic and Slavic thunderstorm god.

KEYWORDS: Perun, Perkūnas, storm god, divine weapon, hunter

Our knowledge of the Slavic god Perun has grown considerably over the past 30 years, in particular through works and monographs (Klejn 2004; Lajoye, 2015) that have criticized and refined the fundamental essays of Vyacheslav Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov (Ivanov 1958; Ivanov & Toporov 1965, 1970, 1974, 2002). The personality of the god, as well as certain modalities of his worship, are now well known. However, it should be noted that apart from the reconstruction of the cycle of the calendar fights against Veles, proposed by Ivanov and Toporov, no mythological narrative seems to have been preserved.

A BALTO-SLAVIC MYTH

However, a particular mythological fragment was pointed out in by Louis Leger (1901: 64-65). This fragment, from the region of Sandomir, Polish Galicia, was first published in 1881 with a German translation:

> A lord went hunting on Sundays before mass. One day, he went and walked until he could no longer hunt: it was time to go to mass. But now a black cloud is coming, and it begins to thunder in the distance. The lord looks and sees on the river a large ugly bird lying on a stone. Then he thinks in himself: "I haven't yet captured anything." He remembered that for seven years he had carried a holy bullet in his sack. And without too much thought, he removed the ammunition from his rifle to place the holy bullet in, he fired and the bird fell from the stone on the ground. Then he approached

it, lifted it up and looked at it, for he had never seen such a bird, and he said to himself: "What a pity to have used this bullet on such an ugly bird." Then someone shouted behind him: "Don't worry, I ran after this bird for seven years without being able to reach it. While you were aiming at it, I was targeting you. If you had not killed it, I would have killed you." The lord was frightened, looked around him, and saw before him an immense man, like a tree, holding a rifle as big as a log. It was Ṕeron (Pieron), who took the lord by the hand and talked long with him. They examined their guns, he (Ṕeron) told him not to hunt on Sunday, and he flew away like the wind (Matusiak 1881: 641-642)."

What Louis Leger had not seen is that this text is not isolated in the Slavic domain. Indeed, there is a Russian version, collected at Simbirsk (now Ulyanovsk), which replaces Pieron with the prophet Elijah:

The prophet Elijah and the archer.
There was once an archer *(strelec)* who had gone to the lake, and the thundering prophet Elijah had brought a thundering cloud over the lake. The archer hid from the storm in the bushes, and saw that a human head came out of the water and hid under it. Each time lightning appeared, the head was under water. The thunder strikes at this place, but fails to kill him (in the water). "What kind of man is he? I'll shoot at him." He fired and a dead man appeared. The archer got scared of killing a man and complained. He fled, when he met an old man, Elijah himself.
— Were you on the lake? asked the latter.
— Yes.
— Did you kill a man?
— No.
— No? Tell me, did you kill him?
— No.
He didn't confess, you know.
—Yes, you did, do not fear, said Elijah. You killed the devil. You helped me. I aimed at him, aimed at him, but I couldn't kill him with lightning. With that, take my gun here, I give it to you. With this gun, whatever you aim at, you will hit.
The archer took the rifle and began to shoot down everything he saw. This made his barin [lord] envious.
—Sell it, yes, sell it to me!
— No, for nothing in the world.
— Then let us fight. If you kill me (and the barin was a sorcerer), it will be yours, but if not, the rifle will be mine.
The barin sits on the bell-tower, where the bells hang.
—Shoot!

The archer pulled the trigger and hit the barin on the shoulder.
—Well, you didn't kill me. Give me the rifle!
The archer didn't give it.
—I touched you, he said.
— Well, said the barin, now shoot this cross, if you can break it.
But two pigeons had sat on the cross. Then, the archer aimed very carefully, and he touched the cross and killed the two pigeons.
For that Elijah blinded him, and the barin took the rifle and started shooting for himself. (Sadovnikov 1884: n°93, 282)

Better still, there are several Lithuanian versions. One of the first ones was published in 1894 in Polish by Mečislovas Davainis-Silvestraitis:

Tale of Perkunas.
A hunter (*strzelec*) had gone into the forest. He walked, walked, and went astray. Then a storm broke out, with lightning and thunder. The hunter hid under a pine tree. Then he noticed that as soon as the lightning (*perkunas*) struck, a devil jumped out of a hollow tree, shouting like a goat. The hunter took his rifle with a scapular. As soon as the lightning (perkunas) struck, the devil came out quickly and shouted like a goat. He shot it. Guts fell from the hollow tree. Perkunas struck these guts. The rain stopped. The hunter found his way back home. On the way he saw a black man, who said to him, "Thank you, very humbly. For fifteen years, I pursued this devil and I could not kill him. You helped me kill him. I will give you a horn of lead and a horn of powder, such that you will never need to buy it again." (Davainis-Silvestraitis 1894, t.2:62-63)

Other versions were subsequently published, such as this one:

Perkūnas hunts a devil (Perkūnas medžioja velnią).
On the land of a peasant, not far from his house, there was a large rock on which a black cat appeared when the storm came [when lightning passed and thundered]. The cat danced and laughed at Perkūnas – he was possessed by a devil (a devil had turned into a cat). Perkūnas couldn't bear the devil, but couldn't defeat him, beat him. He had never ceased striking this mocking cat on his rock, but he couldn't beat the black cat, the devil. The peasant decided he had to get rid of this black cat. He had heard that it was possible to shoot down the devil himself with a silver bullet. As the storm rumbled, when the black cat appeared on the rock and began to mock Perkūnas, the peasant, slowly walked along the edge of the field, not to be seen by the cat, and shot it down. The black cat fell in an instant from the rock. At the same time, Perkūnas struck the spot of the rock where the cat had perished [i. e. before its fall]. Then Perkūnas (in the form of a giant of fire, like a

column, in fire-clothes, with two long arrows in each hand) appeared to the hunter, showing him the arrows, and said: "I have used many of these arrows, but I haven't been able to shoot the devil. Thank you for helping me to free myself from this evil." Perkūnas didn't really support the devil, he was exhausted by him, for it seemed that the devil was more powerful than him. Yet Perkūnas also has the faculty to transform himself into a man or some other creature. (Balys, 1938: 53)

And this one:

There was once strong thunder, and it was raining a lot. A hunter, seated under a tree, took his trouble in patience. There was a large hollow tree nearby; at the very moment the thunder roared, a cat took its head from the hollow of the tree and made a mocking mimic:
— Ve ve ve ve.
The hunter loaded his rifle with a silver bullet and waited. As soon as the thunder growled, the cat pulled out his head to make fun of it – he made "bang bang" on the cat, and it exploded. The thunder stops scolding, the lightning bolts illuminate the sky, so the hunter returns home. On the way he meets a man who says to him:
— Thank you for shooting down this creature of evil! I brought him with me from the third kingdom, but I couldn't handle it. Here, now I give you three bullets. Here is what you can do with it: put one on the palm of your hand and blow in the direction of a very large object - immediately it will disappear.
And he went away. The hunter took them and tried one: he laid it on his palm and blew it to a very large oak – and it flew into a thousand shards. As for the hunter, he deposited the two [remaining] bullets in a church. (Slančiauskas 1975:160)

The latest version was finally published in 1979:

The shot devil.
A hunter of hares came to a shelter. A cloud had come, the thunder had begun to scold. He looked under a stone and saw a beast, like a kitten. The thunder struck again under the stone. A little later, the creature came out again and showed her buttocks to the cloud. The hunter's rifle fired, and it collapsed. The hunter looked - the beast did not look like a hare. And it was a little devil. An old man approached him.
— Who shot here? He asked.
He showed himself.
— You've got a good rifle! I shot and shot, but I missed it.
The old man was Perkūnas. He suggested to the hunter:

— Let's exchange our rifles!

He handed the hunter a rifle as long as a finger.

— All you have to do is aim, and you can even touch a bird, even a fish. A raven flies, you aim it - then it will fall. But do not touch the trigger! They made the exchange. The hunter went home. He began to catch rabbits and roes. Three years he lived well, and even better. He had a farm, a wife, children. But then it passed through his mind to try to pull the trigger. He raised the hammer, then he pressed. How great was the thunder! The hunter shuddered. And the old Perkūnas arrived:

— What have you done?

He threw his old rifle to the hunter.

— Here, take it. In fact, you smashed a third of the universe!

And on these words, he snatched his little rifle from his hands.

The hunter went home, looked - all the houses were ransacked.

After that, there was no more thunder for three years. From that moment, old Perkūnas never gave his rifle to others. (Vėlius 1979, Russian trans. 2010: 59-61).

As we can see, these six texts may diverge on details, but on the whole, they are based on the same framework:

Motif	Galicia	Russia	Lithuania 1	Lithuania 2	Lithuania 3	Lithuania 4
Character	A lord	A hunter *(strelec)*	A hunter *(strzelec)*	A peasant	A hunter	A hunter
When?	Every Sunday before mass					
He gets lost	X		X			
A storm breaks out	X	X	X	X	X	X
At the water's edge	A river	A lake				
The hunter hides		In bushes	Under a pine tree			
A creature is on a stone	X			X		X (under the stone)
A creature is in a hollow tree			X		X	
Creature type	A great bird	A devil with a human head	A little devil	A black cat	A cat	A cat
Lightning strikes but does not touch the creature		X	X	X	X	X
The hunter uses a special weapon	A blessed bullet		A rifle with a scapular	A silver bullet	A silver bullet	

A voice sounds	X					
A thundering character	Pieron	Saint Elijah	Perkunas	Perkunas	Perkunas?	Perkūnas
Very large	X			X		
Similar to a column/tree	X			X		
A weapon in his hand	A rifle			Arrows		A rifle
Thanks the hunter	X	X	X	X	X	X
Declares to hunt the creature for a long time, without success	For 7 years	X	For 15 years		X	X
While threatening him	X					
Says something to the man	Do not hunt on Sundays					
Gives something to the man		A rifle that can hit anything that is targeted	A horn of lead and a horn of powder, both inexhaustible		Three bullets that can make anything vanish	A rifle that can hit anything that is targeted
The man accomplishes an impious act		He shoots a church at a bet against a sorcerer				He breaks a taboo about the rifle and destroys a third of the universe
The thundering character picks up the weapon		X			The hunter let the remaining two bullets into a church	X

This great coherence between the different versions, and the fact that they all concern a thundering character, whether he is pagan (Pieron, Perkūnas) or Christian (Saint Elijah), shows that we are not dealing with a legend type, but with a myth related to the ancient storm god. Although it is more widely held in Lithuania than elsewhere, it is difficult to say whether the Slavs borrowed it from the Balts: it is easier at this stage of the research to talk about a common Balto-Slavic myth.

All these texts show a particularly folklorized topic: the hunter gets a gun, and it is this weapon, or its ammunition that the thundering character can give as a reward for the killing of the demonic creature. In the same way, a holy bullet, or a rifle with a scapular are sometimes mentioned, which are signs of Christianization. However, some evidence shows that the background can be particularly archaic. Thus, in the Russian version, the hunter is designated by a word that was not commonly used in the 19th century: *strelec*, a term used to designate the equivalent of musketeers in the time of Peter the Great,

and which means "archer". This same term is used in the Polish translation of the first Lithuanian tale. This could indicate that the hunter was originally an archer. One of the Lithuanian texts also shows us Perkūnas not with a rifle but with arrows.

In any case, it is possible to propose the reconstruction of the following story: a hunter is lost in the forest and arrives near a river or a lake, where he sees a demonic creature. A storm breaks out, lightning strikes but does not kill the creature. The hunter uses a special weapon (bullet or rifle) to kill the creature. Then the storm god appears and offers the hunter special weapons. The latter, however, performs an impious act, and the storm god takes the weapons back.

COMPARISONS

This reconstructed narrative is based on two major elements: a hunter kills a creature that a god could not reach; for this, he receives, as a reward, fabulous weapons.

The motif of the human hero who helps a god to defeat an otherwise invulnerable adversary is present in many Indo-European mythologies: in Greece, the presence of Heracles is indispensable to the gods to defeat the Giants; in India, Arjuna is the only one capable of helping Indra to beat the Nivātakavaca demons. The meeting of the hero and the god is done most often during a hunt, while the two dispute a prey. The conflict is then resolved when the hero agrees to fight the enemies of the god (Sterckx 2015).

However, in the case of our Balto-Slavic accounts, the enemy of the god and the prey are one, and his killing by the hero is at the origin of the gratitude expressed by the god, who then offers a weapon. Although similar, the respective structures of the two types of motifs are not quite the same.

The motif of the gift of a fabulous weapon by a god to a hero is relatively rare, at least in the Indo-European domain. Heracles receives a cuirass from Hephaestus, a horse from Poseidon, a peplos from Athena, a sword from Hermes, but also and especially bow and arrows, which will become his main weapons (with the club that will be made by himself), from Apollo (Diodorus Siculus, *Library*: II, 4, 11; Apollodorus, *Library*: IV, 14, 3). This same Apollo also gives a bow to Orestes, son of Agamemnon, to enable him to drive out the Erynia who assail him (Euripides, *Orestes*: 268-271). In the Caucasus, in an Ossetian tale, the Nart Soslan receives a sword from Uastyrdži – Saint George (Dumézil 1965: 71-73). In France, God, through the intermediary of an angel and Charlemagne, had given the sword Durandal to Roland (*Chanson de Roland:* CLXXIII). The idea of a weapon given by a god (Ishtar, Adad, Ashur, or Yahweh) to a king seems to be a fairly common idea in the Near East and Mesopotamia (Lang 2002: 54-57), but it is more a way of designating the king as legitimate, than a reward.

It is an unusual motif: when one knows the origin of the weapons of an epic hero, it is generally found that it is those of his father, or more rarely, weapons made by his mother or on her orders (Achilles in Greece – Allen 2010; Chumong in Korea – Lajoye 2016: 51). In India, Arjuna, the hero of the *Mahābhārata*, is a collector of divine weapons: he receives them from Agni, Indra, Śiva and others.

The way in which Arjuna acquires his main weapon, the Gāṇḍīva bow, is the closest thing to the Balto-Slavic texts. This episode is found in Book I of the *Mahābhārata* (I, 214-225). Arjuna is with his coachman Kṛṣṇa in a forest when a famished man, a Brahman, appears before them. This man is the fire god Agni, exhausted and ready to die. To remedy this state, it is necessary to burn the Khāṇḍava forest and all the creatures that are there, including demons, headed by the Nāga king Takṣaka. But Indra, the storm god and friend of Takṣaka, is opposed to this fire, which he extinguishes with rain. Agni then asks Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa for help. They accept, but on one condition: that Agni provides them with exceptional weapons. Agni will give them a marvelous chariot, he will give a disk *(sudarśana cakra)* to Kṛṣṇa, and to Arjuna, the bow Gāṇḍīva, which belonged to Varuṇa, and two quivers. The bow is infallible, and the two quivers are inexhaustible. Thus armed, the two heroes will shoot down any creature that will come out of the forest, while Agni sets it on fire. Seeing this, Indra intervenes and triggers a storm. But Arjuna sends so many arrows to the sky that the rain does not reach the ground. A heavenly voice finally intervenes and orders Indra to stop the fight because destiny predicted that the forest had to burn. Indra accepts and congratulates Arjuna, who then takes advantage of it to ask for a reward, the god's weapons, which will be handed to him later.

The sequel takes place in Book III of the *Mahābhārata* (*cf.* the *Kirātārjunīya*). Arjuna is then in the middle of the forest, giving himself up to asceticism, an asceticism so powerful that the gods decide to put an end to it. Śiva descends on earth, disguised as a hunter, and as he prepares to meet Arjuna, a demon in the form of a wild boar rushes to the hero. The man and the god kill the demon at the same time, but Arjuna disputes the shot of Śiva. Both fight but Arjuna realizes that his opponent, apparently a simple hunter, surpasses him to almost kill him. He then prays to Śiva to give him more strength. The god, satisfied, resumes his true appearance and offers the Pāśupatāstra, an invulnerable weapon, to Arjuna. Then, other gods offer weapons to the hero, and finally, Indra invites him in his paradise to give him his own weapons, as promised previously.

Although divergent in detail, these two stories can be compared with the Balto-Slavic myth reconstructed above:

Balto-Slavic myth	Arjuna and Gāṇḍīva	Arjuna and Pāśupatāstra
A hunter gets lost in a forest	Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa isolate themselves in a forest	Arjuna isolates himself on a mountain
	Agni asks Arjuna to burn the forest, filled with creatures and demons	
	Agni tried several times to burn the forest, without success	
	Agni gives Arjuna an infallible bow and two inexhaustible quivers	
A demonic creature appears	Animals and demons flee the forest	A boar-shaped demon appears

A storm breaks out	Indra launches a storm on the forest	
Lightning strikes the creature without success		
The hunter decides to shoot the creature	Arjuna starts killing animals and demons	Arjuna shoots the demon
The hunter kills the creature	Arjuna kills almost all demons	Arjuna kills the demon
		Śiva disguised as a hunter appears and reproaches Arjuna for having killed his prey
		Arjuna engages in fight against Śiva
		Arjuna fails to defeat Śiva
		Arjuna prays Śiva
A thundering character thanks the hunter	Agni thanks the hero	Śiva is satisfied with Arjuna
		Śiva gives Arjuna an infallible weapon. Other gods do the same.
The thundering character gives the hunter an infallible gun / inexhaustible horns of powders and lead	Indra promises to give his weapons to Arjuna	Indra gives his weapons to Arjuna

In all three accounts, we find a common framework, based on common motifs, which can, however, take place at different times. For example, the motif of a fight, in which the supposedly most powerful character fails, moves. Similarly, in the episode of the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest, Arjuna is dealing with two gods, not one. However, the result is the same in all three cases: the hero has accomplished something that a god could not do, something that requires the death of animal-shaped demons and, in reward, he receives fabulous weapons. In the Balto-Slavic texts, however, the hero is forced to return the weapon to the god after performing an impious act, while in the *Mahābhārata* Arjuna returns Gāṇḍīva to Varuṇa not after an impious act but after winning the battle of Kurukṣetra. In one case only, the Lithuanian hunter chooses to deposit his two remaining bullets in a church.

It is evidently very improbable that this type of narrative was borrowed by the Balto-Slavs from India, or by the Indians from the Balto-Slavs. It is, therefore, a common heritage, the traces of which may also be found in Greece, in the manner in which Thetis obtains from Hephaistos a fabulous weapon, a cuirass, for her son Achilles, who thus victoriously combats the Trojans and the river Scamander (Allen 2010). However, several elements diverge in the Greek narrative: it is not the hero who helps the god, but the reverse, and Hephaistos, a god certainly linked to fire, intervenes only at the request of Thetis, as a help. In the Indian and Balto-Slavic texts, the weapon is returned to its divine owner, which is not the case with the armour of Achilles. Finally, the idea that the hero or hunter is isolated in the forest is missing: the Greek episode takes place in an epic with multiple protagonists.

CONCLUSION

A hero finds himself isolated in the forest. He fights and kills at least one animal-shaped demonic creature, which a god could not defeat. As a token of gratitude, the god gives the hero fabulous weapons. This fairly simple framework is found in Lithuania, Poland, Russia, India and possibly Greece. In the Baltic and Slavic versions, it is associated with the storm god. In India, this story is at the heart of a vast epic. It is a key episode of the *Mahābhārata,* a text that details the foundation of Brahminical theological thought. Among the Balts and Slavs, it is no more than a simple legend whose religious meaning has become obscure. But we can now postulate that it could also be a fragment of a now lost mythological epic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LE DIEU DE L'ORAGE ET LE CHASSEUR: UN FRAGMENT D'UNE ANCIENNE ÉPOPÉE

PATRICE LAJOYE

◇◇◇

Des légendes lituaniennes, polonaise et russe présentent une trame qui peut se résumer de la même manière : un chasseur découvre une créature fabuleuse, qu'il tue. Un personnage tonnant (Perkūnas en Lituanie, Pieron en Pologne ou saint Élie en Russie), intervient alors et remercie le chasseur d'avoir pu tuer cette créature alors que lui n'y parvenait pas. En réconpense, le personnage tonnant offre une arme fabuleuse au chasseur. Cette trame se retrouve avec précision dans le *Mahābhārata,* quand le héros Arjuna, seconde par Kṛṣṇa, vient en aide au dieu Agni pour tuer toutes les créatures d'une forêt, recevant pour cela des armes fabuleuses. Du fait que ce récit n'a vraisemblablement pas été emprunté par les Balto-Slaves aux Indiens, on peut en déduire qu'il s'agit d'un fragment de mythologie épique, conservé de façon dégradée dans des légendes.

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