

# There is no »Perun in the Caucasus«... but maybe an ancient Iranian thunder demon

Patrice Lajoie

*Thirty years ago, the Russian historian L. S. Klejn proposed that the legendary Chechen and Ingush character Pira or Pirow was borrowed during the Middle Ages by the local population from the Russian mythology, through a contingent of Eastern Slavs deported there by the caliph Mervan II. Thus, Pira or Pirow would be the old Slavic god Perun. I will propose here an alternative source to this legendary figure, an Iranian source. A hero named Piran indeed appears in the Shahnameh, Ferdowsi's epic dating from the tenth century. That hero, like Pira or Pirow, is able, through an intermediary, to make rain and lightning. In fact, the name Piran seems to have an etymology close to that of the god Perun.*

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There is a mythological figure in the Caucasus, called Pir'a or Pir'ow, which attracted, a few years ago, the attention of the Russian historian L. S. Klejn, who tried to assimilate him to the Slavic god Perun. But what exactly? And what are the origins of this Pir'a or Pir'ow, a character who is involved in stories for which we can determine the sources, which are many and varied?

## Sources

Pir'a or Pir'ow is a Caucasian mythological character known by Chechens and Ingush. However, the sources are very few, and they have been collected relatively recently.

Thus, an Ingushian tradition made Seli Pir'ow (Pir'ow son of Seli), the elder brother of Soska Solsa (the Ossetian Soslan). Soska Solsa was regarded to be very strong, while Pir'a was weak in body but intelligent. One day the latter brought from the other world a water mill, which the Ingush did not know before. Solsa comes to see the thing and carries away the centerpiece. But when he wants to rebuild the mill, he is forced to fit in the missing piece, which condemns him to stay put. Pir'a then proposes to manufacture a new part, subject to being granted half of the production (Dalgat, 1972, p. 143 and 302–303).

The character is better documented among the Chechens: Pir'ow is a native sovereign or a foreign king, who feuded with Diala (God). Having built a fake heaven in copper, he made his subjects transport barrels full of water on it. It was believed that the noise produced by the barrels was the thunder, and the water flowing out the rain. He

tried to convince his countrymen of his divine power. But Diala tolerated him because of his qualities: he respected the elderly, children, and saved the bread.

Some other versions show him praying to Diala in secret, for he slows the course of the sun, for eclipses occur, for he sends rain: it was possible for him to warn his people in advance. Malevolent spirits persuaded him to abandon his virtues, then God punished him. He was 500 years old.

A variant tells us that one day Pir'on forced a woman to get on the vault of heaven and to pour water. In anger, she exclaimed: »May God punish you! How dishonest you are!« And God did so (Malsagov, 1983, p. 307).

Another one says that Pir'on *padtshah* (King Pir'on) really created heaven and earth (Malsagov, 1983, p. 307).

More recently, Mariel Tsaroeiva has published in French a new testimony, resuming the legend formerly known: Pir'ow would have built a copper roof over the city and rolled barrels filled with water in order to pretend to be God. It adds, however, a variation on the fall of Pir'ow: one day Pir'ow climbed on this roof with his troops and shouted to Dela (God): »I almost reached to the heavens, come down and fight in a duel: we'll see who is stronger.« Then God sent a little mosquito that penetrated through the nose into the brain of Pir'ow, and after many days the creature ate his brain and came out in the shape of a bird (Tsaroeiva, 2005, p. 250).

### Klejn's analysis

Discovering the texts published by Dalgat and Malsagov, Klejn made a first analysis showing the character of Pir'a / Pir'ow: it is thundering, heavenly, and includes a factor of agrarian fertility. And if we take into account the pronunciation of its name, it looks very much like the Slavic Perun (Klejn, 1985, reprinted in Klejn, 2004, p. 131–138). Of course, Klejn quoted Dalgat's hypothesis that the name may have been influenced by Arabic *Fir'awn*, Pharaoh (Dalgat, 1972, p. 432; Klejn, 2004, p. 135; Tsaroeiva, 2005, p. 250). However, he quickly rejects the idea that this character is native or was borrowed from the peoples of the South Caucasus. For Klejn, Pir'a / Pir'ow was borrowed by the Vainakh from the Slavs, and such a borrowing could only be done in the course of the Middle Ages. Then he invokes the Arab sources mentioning the deportation, in 732 AD, of a contingent of 2000 Slavs by the Caliph Mervan II, in a Caucasus region near present-day Chechnya (Klejn, 2004, p. 137). This population has merged with the Vainakh; the Slavs would have introduced into the local pantheon their chief god, Perun, who would thus, once degraded, have been preserved in folklore.

Besides the fact that it is questionable whether a transfer of 2000 people is enough to introduce a foreign god in a pantheon, the hypothesis is very bold, especially as the legends that retain the characters traces bore, as we shall see, many influences: Ossetian, Iranian, Arabian.

More cautious was Mariel Tsaroeiva, who doesn't know Klejn's hypothesis, just made a connection between Pir'a and Indo-European protoform *\*Perkwos*, which was used to designate several storm gods (Slavic Perun, Lithuanian Perkunas<sup>4</sup>, and also Indian Parjanya, Scandinavian Fjörgynn, etc.).

### The Ossetian contribution

If we examine this more closely, the legends preserved by the Ingush and the Chechens are a collection of borrowings from various other peoples, dating from different periods. The most abundant borrowings are made from the Ossetians, simply because of the presence of Njart Seska Solsa, that is to say, the Nart Soslan. The Ingush legend of Seli Pir'ow seems inspired by an Ossetian tale showing a young Soslan acting as servant at a banquet of the spirits (*ie*, the gods). There, they realize his value ahead and make him some gifts that will benefit all the Narts. Thus Uatsilla (St. Elias), the Spirit of Thunder, gives the Narts seeds, that will bring forth grain as much as they need, while Donbettyr, the patron of water, ordered them to build mills, because from now his daughters (water spirits), will be required to turn the wheels (Dumézil, 1965, p. 71-73). It is thus thanks to Soslan, staying with the spirits, that the Narts were able to build the mills, while in the Ingush legend, Solsa Seska steals the mill brought from the other world by his brother.

Similarly, the stories about the death of Pir'a among Chechens could partially be inspired by Ossetian legends, including the corpus related to Batradz, the thundering Nart. An Ossetian tale (Dumézil, 1965, p. 233-235) shows him as a true wicked warrior, as Pir'a is: he set out to heaven, in order to defy God. Then some supernatural barriers were placed on his last road (one is a bag that contains the Earth's gravity). Batradz abandoned his project: back down on earth, however, he soon died. In the legend of Chechnya, God sends a mosquito that will make Pir'a die several days later. But this pattern of the mosquito, as shown by Tsaroiéva, was borrowed from the Muslim legends.

In the Chechen legends collected by Malsagov, it is due to the anger of a woman who cursed him, that Pir'a dies, killed by God. Or when the Ingush and Chechens borrow the character Batradz from the Ossetians, they make Pataraz, a hero so strong that the abundance disappears (for the Chechens, God has taken away abundance, to punish the Njarts for their excessive violence). An old woman then makes the charge against him, leading Pataraz to the other world, so to die (Dumézil, 1930, p. 72-73).

### A Manichean input?

The idea of the fake heaven, built by Pir'ow, it is also not indigenous: it comes probably from a Manichean origin, even if it does not appear among the oldest sources of this religion. A good example of this type of myth is found in a tale collected among the Turks of the Altai in the nineteenth century by Radlov (Radlov, 1886, I, p. 175 f.; Coxwell, 1925, p. 301-308; Dragomanov, 1961, p. 40-47). The devil, Erlik, who gets along with God, is permitted to create humanity in heaven. But this creation is bad, and God sends the hero Mandi-Shire (the bodhisattva Manjus'ri) to fight Erlik. The fake sky, here in stone, is destroyed and its ruins fall to the earth to form mountains. These Turkish peoples were for a long time Manichean, at least superficially, before being converted to Islam.

### Pir'a: an Iranian?

But from where is the character of Pir'a itself? A character that no one considers to be aboriginal. Rather than looking to the north, one should more likely turn toward the

South Caucasus, particularly in Iran. Ancient Iranian civilization has greatly influenced the Caucasian cultures, and that since ancient times. During the Middle Ages, legends crossed the Caucasus: we remember the hero Rostam, who, traveling to Russia, has become Eruslan Lazarevič.

The very title of *padtshah*, given by the Chechen to Pir'ow, authorizes us to think about it. The *Shahnameh*, the great Iranian epic poem of the Middle Ages, has rightly a hero called Pīrān, a Turanian general, Turanians being officially the Turkish invaders of Iran, in fact demons, the devs. Pīrān is at the origin of one of the few magical actions in this part of the epic, namely the use against the Iranian army of the powers of a sorcerer capable of unleashing lightning, rain and thunder.

Pīrān son of Vesa appears in the *Avesta*, *Yasht* 5.57-59. He is also just named in the *Bundahišn*, 31, 17. In the *Shahnameh*, Pīrān is the most important son of Vesa, all of whom are opposed to the Iranians, including Rostam. However, the demonic character of Pīrān is extremely slight. He is a valiant warrior, and he gives often proof of nobility, to deserve the honor of his opponents after his death in battle (Bailey, 1983, p. 443).

While most of the *Shahnameh* part concerning the hero Rostam contains only few magical acts, Pīrān is precisely the source of one of the most important:

»Il y avait parmi les Turcs un homme nommé Bazour, qui avait en tout pays exercé la magie, qui avait les ruses et l'art des enchantements, et savait le pehlevi et le chinois. Piran dit à ce magicien: 'Va sur la crête de la montagne, et accable à l'instant les Iraniens de neige, de froid, et d'un vent furieux.' Déjà l'air était sombre, quoiqu'on fût au premier mois de l'été, et un nuage noir couvrait la montagne. Bazour monta sur la hauteur, et tout à coup il s'éleva un orage et une tourmente de neige qui paralysait dans la bataille les mains des Iraniens armés de lances. [S'ensuit un carnage: les troupes iraniennes sont décimées par les Turaniens. A la suite d'une prière adressée à Dieu, Rehham, un héros iranien, découvre Bazour]. Rehham s'élança du champ de bataille, poussa son cheval hors des rangs de l'armée, et montant ensuite à pied sur la crête de la montagne, en serrant les pans de sa cotte de mailles dans sa ceinture. Le magicien le vit et vint le combattre, une massue d'acier chinois dans la main; Rehham, lorsqu'il fut près de lui, tira son épée vengeresse et lui abattit la main. Un orage pareil à celui qui naîtra le jour de la résurrection s'éleva aussitôt et emporta le nuage qui avait obscurci l'air. Le vaillant Rehham, tenant dans sa main la main coupée du magicien, descendit de la montagne, et arrivé dans la plaine, il remonta sur son destrier. L'air était redevenu ce qu'il avait été auparavant; le soleil brillait et le ciel était bleu« (French trans. Mohl, 1876, p. 25-27).

So Pīrān raises, via a magician placed on top of a mountain and armed with a club, a devastating storm. Similarly, among the Chechens, Pir'ow is not directly at the origin of the storm, but the people he raises on his artificial sky, and they roll the barrels filled with water. It seems that we have here a concordance between the actions, both in their procedures, and in the names of the characters who are at the origin of the action.

The name of Pīrān is interesting. According to the Indo-iranologist Eric Pirart:

»Etant donné le proto-indo-européen \*dlHghó-<sup>7</sup> »long« > proto-indo-iranien dṛHghá- > vieil iranien \*darga- (avestique darəya-, cf. védique dīrghá-) > pehlevi dagr >

persan *dēr*, nous pourrions à la rigueur poser vieil-iranien \**pargāna*- > pehlevi \**pagrān* > pehlevi *payrān*«<sup>1</sup>.

The proposed etymon, \**pargāna*-, is very interesting because it seems to be close (yet to demonstrate how: many phonetic difficulties arise), to the names of various Indo-European storm gods, but with no direct phonetic link with the Indian Parjanya. The use of the club by the magician, and its position on top of a mountain, in fact encouraged them to explore this way.

Thus, the few elements from the *Shahnameh*, coupled with the folklore of the Chechen and the Ingush, could lead us on the Iranian path of an ancient Indo-European storm god, that Iranian religion will demonize, like other archaic deities. Further study of this file would be to lead further, but in any case, contrary to what Klejn said, there is no »Perun in the Caucasus.«

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<sup>1</sup> Personnal communication, 11/25/2010.

**На Кавказе »Перуна нет«... есть там, возможно, старый иранский демон**

*Патри́се Лажуа*

Более тридцати лет назад российский историк Л. С. Клейн предположил, что легендарный чечено-ингушский персонаж Пирьон или Пирья является заимствованием, сделанным этими народами в средние века в русской мифологии. Это заимствование произошло возможно при посредстве группы восточных славян, депортированных на Кавказ халифом Мерваном II, и таким образом Пирьоном или Пирьяном мог бы быть славянский бог Перун. В данной работе я предлагаю иное происхождение данного легендарно персонажа, а именно иранское. Герой под именем Пиран появляется в 10 веке, в большой эпопее Шахнамэ автора Фирдоуси. Этот персонаж, также как и Пирьон или Пирья, с помощью других живых существ способен вызывать дожди и молнии. Возможно, что этимология имени Пиран близка этимологии имени бога Перуна.