

The Tectonic Plates of Ásatrú

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Ásatrú, like any other living, breathing organism, has a tendency to not only undergo changes, but also to have divisions, parts, segments, or other partitions within that allow people, inquisitive things that we are, to dissect it. I view these separations within Ásatrú as being like the tectonic plates in the earth. For those unfamiliar with geology, a tectonic plate is a large mobile section of the Earth's crust. Remember, the Earth is a big ball of magma, probably with a large metal core, and about 12 miles (19 km) of crust floating on top. Considering that the Earth is about 8000 miles (13,000 km) in diameter, that's not a whole lot of solid stuff. Anyway, the crust is mobile, floating on an underground sea of magma. Since it's not well supported, the crust is broken up into sections, called tectonic plates. There are a few large plates (I think there's like nine or something, I'm not sure) and maybe some smaller ones, but the big ones are the size of multiple continents and some ocean floor! Where two plates meet, there is a fault line, and plates either bump into each other, one ramming down and under the other while the other bumps up or crumples; or the plates separate, the void being filled with fresh magma making new crust. And, if one plate is banging against another, it's probably leaving a gap somewhere else.

OK, now back to Ásatrú. You see, it's got all these plates in it, each one representing some issue or faction in Ásatrú, or at least, calling itself part of Ásatrú, that really makes this religion not so well-defined. Not that that's a bad thing; evolution of species tells us diversity is a good thing. In any case, each of these elements are things which any Ásatrúar can identify within themselves or not see as a part of them. Each element can almost be considered separately, making the combinations of characteristics infinite, and thus, as widely varied as each individual.

The main divisions I'd like to discuss here are the really big, thick, dividing lines, like fault lines, that nobody can really ignore within Ásatrú, and every person considering themselves Ásatrú must deal with at some time or another. These are: race, existence of magic and the gods, usefulness of the lore, and joining or forming a group. There are many more topics worthy of discussion, but I wish to use these topics for the outline and gloss over the lesser ones. Most of the lesser topics can be found as subsets within these topics (the volcano in the tectonic plate), and can be taken accordingly.

The first, and perhaps foremost, dividing line is how Ásatrúar view persons of other ethnicities participating in Ásatrú. The two main "factions" are what I call the Folkish people and the Non-Folkish. Both are technically Ásatrúar, and use different terms to describe themselves. Other terms include, but are by no means limited to: Folkish and Universalist Ásatrú, Ancestral and Universal Ásatrú, Racialist and Non-Racialist Ásatrú, and the list goes on. Whatever you choose to call one group or the other, there are two basic groups with wide variations in between. If you have never subscribed to any Internet resources such as Ásatrú listservs or the Ásatrú discussion newsgroups (such as alt.religion.asatru), you may not realize what a volatile topic this truly is. Some listservs specifically prohibit any discussion having to do with racial or non-racial influences, just because it's pretty much a powderkeg and the folks who are on the list don't want to hear the same arguments over and over again. Anyway, the basic emphasis of Folkish people is that since the modern recreation that we call Ásatrú originated from the northern Europeans, was used only by them, was not adopted by anyone else, and seems to have only to do with northern Europeans and their way of life, it can really only be felt and experienced by those of

northern European descent, especially since Ásatrú is a religion which pays much attention to one's ancestry and honors ancestors regularly. The basic emphasis of Non-Folkish is that anyone who wishes to honor the gods of northern Europe and his or her ancestors is welcome to do so, regardless of who those ancestors are and from what area of the world you and they came. The arguing begins when they both tend to be right, and tend to miss the middle ground between. The fringes are a lot easier to spot.

The funny thing is that there are really more than two delininations here, it's a scale on both sides. On the Folkish side, you have people ranging from "Well, I don't know why this Japanese guy wants to be Ásatrú, but he's got a Granddad from Norway, so it's in him," to "There can be no other than the perfect race on this planet -- us." On the Non-Folkish side, you see people from "Well, I don't know why this Japanese guy is practicing Ásatrú, Shinto might be better, but the gods choose whom they will," to "What's wrong with Odin, Set, Jesus, and Ganesh on the same altar? I mean, Odin is Norse, right?" The large majority of all Ásatrúar fall toward the middle; say, about 80% who are just on one side or another, with a small minority flaking out to the fringes. Unfortunately, within the majority, are both Anti-Folkish people who think all Folkish people are the fringe Nazis (as I used to be before meeting some really middle-of-the-road Folkish types), and Anti-Non-Folkish people who think all Non-Folkish (Universalist, as they say, much like using the terms "Anti-Life" or "Anti-Choice" to describe Pro-Choice and Pro-life in the abortion issue) are crystal-hugging whining flakes who worship anything that moves (as many used to believe about people like me, until they met middle-of-the-road Non-Folkish, like me). This is unfortunate, because the truth lies between them, and each can learn from the other.

As for me, I am Non-Folkish. The fringe people, the Nazis, the Crystal-Huggers, either side of the fence, to me, are not Ásatrú. Sure they claim to believe in the same gods I believe in, but they do not believe in the underlying principles of Ásatrú. From the fringe Folkish who think they are some sort of perfect race, they do not understand the concept of honor. When you disrespect someone you do not know, their ancestors, and their beliefs, simply because their heritage differs from yours, that is ignorant and dishonorable. It damages your might and main, and dishonors your ancestors. Why? Because you are saying that their ancestors are inferior to yours, they are inferior to you, and their beliefs are inferior to yours simply because they are not your beliefs, ancestors, or heritage. That is a dishonorable act and a dishonorable way to live. The fringe folk who call themselves Ásatrú but are more like Norse Wiccans, Wiccans, pan-Paganists, or universalists are just as bad, and dishonor our gods, as they tend to dilute and mix other faiths with Ásatrú, making it hollow and lifeless. They do not understand the concept of what faith is and what it means, how integral to a person it is and why, and that faith is just more than something to do for fun or sport. Again, the large majority of people calling themselves Ásatrú are, indeed, Ásatrú; however, there are those on the fringe of either side who use the term to describe themselves erroneously.

The second major dividing line is the existence and use of magic. Even the simplest ritual, such as a hammer sign, all the way to performing seiðr, involves the belief in some grade at some level of magic. Why cast runes? Why hammer-sign over your beer? Why do anything that can't be proven to exist or act scientifically? Because one believes at some level in the existence or functioning of the paranormal. Even the belief in the gods shows a belief in their actions, which surely include magic. So, the factions here seem to be the Agnostics and the Practitioners. The Agnostics tend to believe that the gods are aspects of human consciousness or experiences, and that magic is an outward expression of the subconscious desires rather than mystical forces. To the Agnostic, things like seiðr may seem like either charlatanry or just experiencing a waking dream. The Practitioner on the other hand, tends to believe the gods exist, in one form or another, in some physical sense, and there are wights and other beings as well as magical forces to be used. Of course, there are many shades in between, but these are the main

areas and don't spark nearly as much debate as the racial issues, but the debates do go on for a while. I personally am a Practitioner, believing that the gods, wights, and magic do exist -- just because there's some things I can't do or perceive doesn't mean they don't work. And since I've had some pretty bizarre stuff happen to me personally, I tend to believe it was paranormal, if not, magic. Again, there's grades on either side, one person is not just one thing or another.

The third area is discussion of the lore. I perceive two divisions here as well, being the Literalists and the Pragmatists. Literalists view the lore as being true stories (of course, not infallible, but these events actually occurred on one level or another). The information contained therein, while possibly or probably inaccurate, still outline occurrences, prophecies, and the like. The Pragmatists tend to view the lore as a neat bunch of stories with perhaps some useful information in the form of guidelines of how to act or even interpretations of actual events, gods and prophesies, but generally, most of it is a fabrication of a bored skald. As with the others, variations exist. I view myself as a Pragmatist, with major stories such as the Skírnismál outlining perceptions of the times, but not necessarily a literal act, but still a magnificent tale. Other tales are parables, historical accounts, or prophetic speculation. I guess I just don't have enough faith in the ability of 13th century Christian monks to write down, without selective editing, the lore of my heathen ancestors. The biggest problem encountered from using the lore literally is the frequent "Edda-Thumping" that goes on, people bickering about who said what to whom, what that means, what that implies, and what impact that has on Ásatrú today. Quite frankly, it sounds like a bunch of people arguing about the accuracy of a tale passed down by word of mouth for a few thousand years, then written down by a person not of that religion 300 years after the story was last told in the old religion. You may as well argue about the color blue, because it's all just opinions of someone's else's interpretations. While it may allow one to think of things in a different light than before and see the world in a new perspective, I prefer to ask living people how their current existence is affected by current thoughts. Again, there's grades on either side, one person is not just one thing or another.

Finally there is the consideration of joining or forming a group. There seem to be a few divisions here, namely the Solitaires, Kindred Folk, and Organization Folk. The Solitaires practice alone, sometimes they form a hearth where only their immediate family blót and sumbel. They like the personal contact with the gods, and perhaps feel a more intimate connection to the gods or a god than the Average Joe. The Kindred Folk enjoy the small group gathering as a preferred format. Socializing, interaction, conversation, basically a dinner party with lots of drinking and carrying on. While the Solitaire may feel this is irreverent or lackadaisical, the Kindred Folk form a bond and a community spirit that knits the group together tightly and makes one more aware of the interaction of the gods with eachother and with Midgarð. Finally, the Organization folk seek to establish and maintain a local, national, or international association of hearth, garths, frithsteads, kindreds, and the like for the purposes of circulation of large volumes of information, ideas, and to promote general awareness. To a Solitaire, this might appear soulless, and to Kindred Folk, it could feel like unnecessary politics or just plain missing the point of Ásatrú, which is the gods and goddesses rather than organizations. However, the Solitaire finds refuge in his intimacy with the gods, the Kindred Folk find refuge in the tightly-knit group, and the Organization Folk find refuge in the big picture of promoting Ásatrú as a viable and useful religion, trying to earn recognition or respect in the public eye. Personally, I am a Kindred Folk, believing the Solitaire route to be too lonely and droll, since I cannot interact with people that way. Organizations do not interest me for two reasons: I serve no man, and they appear sterile and devoid of passion to me. Who cares if you have members all over the world if they've only met by e-mail, and the person running the show is a power-hungry would-be Asa-Pope? While this may be extreme, there is a certain sterility that follows these organizations. Again, there's grades on either side, one person is not just one thing or another.

These four main areas comprise a large quantity of discussion time when there are tense or heated debates about topics in Ásatrú. Some are more volatile than others, some are more personal than others, but all of them help us all learn. The tectonic plate analogy seems to fit rather well -- when two of these topics enter a conversation you begin to see whether a mountain range forms or a giant gap, depending on the focus of the topic. All of these are inter-related, like on the planet's surface, and they influence each other, yet are still independent. It reminds me of the Kiersey personality test. Anyway, while my personal feelings on each topic are more than likely different from yours, I would like to offer my respect for your opinions, in the hopes you offer the same to me. It is with these trappings we will foster the strength, durability, and honor within Ásatrú that all Ásatrúar deserve.

"If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live."

-- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"Those disputing, contradicting, and confuting people are generally unfortunate in their affairs. They get victory, sometimes, but they never get good will, which would be of more use to them."

-- Benjamin Franklin

"Like a man traveling in foggy weather, those at some distance before him on the road he sees wrapped up in the fog, as well as those behind him, and also the people in the fields on each side, but near him all appears clear, though in truth he is as much in the fog as any of them."

-- Benjamin Franklin