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**LODGE OF MASONIC RESEARCH**  
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**WHAT IS THE YORK RITE?**

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York is associated with both history and legend in relation to the Craft. The Old Mss. Constitutions refer to a legendary assembly of Masons at York in the 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E. and a mythical Charter given by King Athelstan (or sometimes King Edwin). A large number of the old Constitutions emanate from the north of England including Yorkshire. In 1744 Fifield Dassigny mentions 'an assembly of Master Masons under the title of Royal Arch Masons' being held at York and this is one of the earliest references to the Royal Arch Degree.

According to *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia* a distinctive working in which the Royal Arch and Knight Templar Degrees are respectively referred to as the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Degrees was used in the Lodge at York from the mid to late 1700s and in 1725 the York Lodge began to meet as a Grand Lodge, calling itself the Grand Lodge of all England and claiming descent from the mythical Grand Lodge in the time of King Athelstan. This was not a breakaway Grand Lodge. The Grand Lodge at London at that stage did not claim jurisdiction much beyond the Bills of Mortality, i.e. the Cities of London and Westminster and a few additional pieces. The York Masons were simply asserting in their area a similar right to that claimed by the four London lodges that formed the first Grand Lodge.

*Coil* notwithstanding, there is in fact no evidence that the Lodge at York practiced ceremonies different from those in use elsewhere in England. Up till 1816 and the efforts of the Lodge of Reconciliation, the lodge used a catechetical form of the first two Degrees and may have used a dramatic form of the Hiram legend in the third.

The misunderstanding probably relates to the fact that many Yorkshire Lodges were warranted by the Grand Lodge of the Antients. The Antients played down the role of Grand Lodge and the lodge of Master Masons was held to be pre-eminent. Antient lodges believed that their Warrant entitled them to practice any Degree that took their fancy and as many as fourteen different Degrees were regularly worked. The Mark, Past Master and Most Excellent Master and the Red Cross and Knight of Malta were part of the working.

The Grand Lodge of the Antients probably warranted far more colonial lodges than the Moderns and colonial lodges were accustomed to working other Degrees. In addition, from an early age, colonials generally resented interference from overseas. The War of Independence in the States put an end to English jurisdiction and most States set up their own Grand Lodges, claiming the immemorial right of lodges to do so. Even in Canada, which retained its allegiance to England, lodges were very early becoming restive under English control and independent Grand Lodges were set up there towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The York Rite itself has no more to do with Yorkshire than the Scottish Rite has to do with Scotland. Both were of Continental origin and the series now included in the York Rite apparently adopted this name to distinguish it from the Scottish Rite.

The Rite was exported to Central and South America and a version of it is common in North America where it usually consists of a series of degrees, namely 1. Entered Apprentice; 2. Fellow Craft; 3. Master; 4. Mark Master; 5. Past Master; 6. Most Excellent Master; 7. Holy Royal Arch. In the United States, and possibly elsewhere, the Cryptic Degrees of Royal and Select Master are added, as well as an honorary degree, the Order of High Priesthood, belonging to the presiding officer of the Royal Arch. In England and other parts of the Commonwealth this Degree forms part of the series in the Allied Degrees.

The York Rite is practiced in the Province of Alberta in Canada. I am only familiar with the working of the first three Degrees from that Province. The Master Masons' Degree is much more elaborate than any practiced in this country and involves a good deal of play acting. The Branding Iron ceremony demonstrated some years ago by a group from America follow the York Rite. It will be exemplified again here on Saturday, 14<sup>th</sup> June at St. Benedict St. It is a very interesting ceremony and should not be missed.

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