

Archaeologists found a 4th-century Christian church, among the oldest.

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Story by Cassian Holt • 5d • 8 min read

Archaeologists working in the ruins of an ancient Armenian capital have uncovered a 4th-century Christian church that ranks among the earliest known anywhere, a find that reshapes how historians understand the birth of state-backed Christianity. The newly identified sanctuary, buried for centuries beneath later construction, offers a rare, almost time-capsule glimpse of worship in the decades after Armenia embraced the new faith as its official religion.

The discovery is not just another addition to the catalogue of early churches, it is a structural and political statement in stone and mortar, revealing how a young Christian community experimented with architecture, ritual space, and royal power. By tracing what the building's unusual design, location, and material remains reveal, I can sketch how this church fits into the wider story of Armenia's religious identity and the global history of Christianity.

The ancient capital where the church resurfaced.

The church emerged from the archaeological layers of Artaxata, the former royal capital that once controlled key trade routes between the Roman and Persian worlds. Long before Christianity, Artaxata was a cosmopolitan city of palaces, fortifications, and marketplaces, and the decision to plant a Christian sanctuary in this political heartland signalled that the new faith was moving from the margins into the centre of power. Excavations have shown that the church was not an isolated shrine in the countryside but part of a dense urban landscape, which helps explain why its remains were later overbuilt and forgotten.

The current project is a Joint Armenian-German excavation that has been peeling back those layers, revealing how the city evolved from pagan stronghold to Christian capital. Archaeologists from the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia and German institutions have documented not only the church but also surrounding structures, streets, and infrastructure that frame it as a civic as well as religious landmark. By

situating the sanctuary within this broader urban context, the team can read it as a deliberate intervention in the city's layout, a physical claim that Christian worship now belonged at the core of Armenian public life.

A 4th-century church, among the world's earliest.

What makes the Artaxata building so striking is its age. Based on radiocarbon analysis and stratigraphy, the structure dates to the 4th century, placing it within a few generations of Armenia's conversion to Christianity and making it one of the oldest known Christian churches anywhere. That early date matters because it captures a moment when Christian communities were still experimenting with how to translate house-based worship and catacomb gatherings into monumental architecture that could rival temples and palaces.

Reporting on the find has emphasized that Archaeologists Discovered a Christian Church from the 4th Century, One of the Oldest in the World, underscoring how rare it is to find such an early, purpose-built sanctuary in relatively intact form. While some early Christian sites survive as foundations or repurposed halls, this church's preserved plan and features allow researchers to reconstruct how worshippers moved, where clergy stood, and how the building framed their experience of the sacred. In the broader chronology of Christian architecture, it sits alongside the earliest basilicas of the Roman Empire, yet it emerged in a very different political and cultural setting.

An octagonal plan with a cross-shaped core.

Architecturally, the Artaxata church stands out for its octagonal layout, a choice that immediately sets it apart from the rectangular basilicas that would later dominate Christian building. The structure combines an eight-sided outer shell with a cross-shaped interior, creating a compact but symbolically rich space that likely guided processions and focused attention on a central liturgical point. Octagonal plans in Christian architecture are often associated with ideas of renewal and eternity, and here that geometry is fused with the unmistakable sign of the cross carved into the building's footprint. Archaeologists describe the newly uncovered sanctuary as an octagonal Christian church with cross-shaped extensions, built with stone walls, a mortar floor, and terracotta roof tiles. Those details matter because they show that the builders were not

improvising with whatever materials were at hand but investing in a durable, carefully engineered structure. The combination of geometric precision and solid construction suggests that the community behind the church had both theological ambitions and access to skilled labour, likely supported by elite or royal patrons who wanted a building that could visually compete with older pagan monuments.

What the excavation revealed inside the sanctuary.

Inside the church, the excavation has uncovered features that illuminate how the space was used. In the cross-shaped extensions, researchers identified the remains of wooden platforms, which likely served as raised areas for clergy, choirs, or perhaps relic displays. The presence of these platforms indicates a structured liturgy in which different groups occupied distinct zones, reinforcing hierarchies and choreographing movement during services. The platforms also hint at the use of perishable materials like wood and textiles that rarely survive but once softened the stone geometry with colour and texture.

Radiocarbon analysis of those wooden elements, carried out as part of the study of the Artaxata building, helped anchor the church firmly in the 4th century. Combined with the stratigraphic evidence, the dating of these platforms confirms that the sanctuary was not a later medieval insertion but part of the earliest wave of monumental Christian construction in Armenia. For archaeologists, such convergence of architectural, material, and scientific data is rare, and it allows them to speak with unusual confidence about how early Armenian Christians organized their sacred interiors.

A joint Armenian-German effort and expert voices.

The discovery is the product of a long-running collaboration between Armenian and German scholars who have been systematically re-examining Artaxata's ruins. The Joint discovery by an Armenian-German team in Artaxata reflects a broader trend in archaeology, where international partnerships pool expertise in excavation techniques, conservation, and historical interpretation. Armenian researchers bring deep knowledge of local history, language, and religious tradition, while German institutions contribute technical resources and comparative perspectives from other early Christian sites across Europe and the Near East. Among the Armenian experts involved is Mkrtych Zardaryan of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, who has highlighted how the church's

design and context confirm its role as a major early Christian centre. Archaeologists from the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia have stressed that the find is not only a scientific milestone but also a cultural one, reinforcing Armenia's narrative as a cradle of Christian statehood. Their statements, grounded in years of fieldwork, give weight to the claim that this is not just one more ancient building but a key piece in the puzzle of how Christian institutions took root in the Caucasus.

Armenia as the oldest Christian state.

The Artaxata church gains even more significance when set against Armenia's claim to be the first state to adopt Christianity as its official religion. According to Armenian tradition and many historians, the kingdom embraced Christianity in the early 4th century, ahead of the Roman Empire's formal endorsement. That early conversion meant that Armenian rulers, bishops, and builders had to invent what a Christian state looked like in practice, from court rituals to public architecture. A monumental church in the royal capital was one of the clearest ways to broadcast that new identity.

Recent coverage has framed the sanctuary as The Oldest Church of the Oldest Christian State has Finally Been Discovered, with the structure dated to roughly 1,700 years ago. That figure, cited by the researchers, underscores how closely the church's construction followed the kingdom's conversion, suggesting that it may have been part of an early state-sponsored building program. In that light, the Artaxata church is not just a religious site but a political monument, a stone proclamation that Armenia's rulers had tied their legitimacy to the Christian God.

How it compares to Etchmiadzin and other early churches.

To understand the Artaxata church's place in Christian architectural history, it helps to compare it with other early Armenian sanctuaries, especially Etchmiadzin Cathedral. Etchmiadzin, located in the city of Vagharshapat, is widely regarded as one of the oldest cathedrals in the world and the spiritual centre of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Over centuries it has been rebuilt and expanded, but tradition holds that its origins also lie in the 4th century, when Armenia's first Christian leaders sought a permanent seat for their authority. That long history makes Etchmiadzin a touchstone for evaluating new discoveries.

According to historical and architectural studies, Etchmiadzin Cathedral has undergone multiple phases of construction, with its current form reflecting later medieval and modern interventions layered over an early core. By contrast, the Artaxata church survives only as ruins, but those ruins preserve a relatively pure 4th-century plan that has not been obscured by later rebuilding. In some ways, that makes Artaxata a clearer window into the experimental phase of Christian architecture, while Etchmiadzin illustrates how those experiments evolved into enduring institutional forms. Together, they chart a trajectory from early, perhaps more flexible designs to the standardized cathedral complexes that would dominate Armenian religious life.

Among the oldest churches in the world, and Armenia's oldest.

Beyond Armenia's borders, the Artaxata church now joins a small group of contenders for the title of the world's earliest surviving Christian sanctuaries. When archaeologists describe it as one of the oldest churches anywhere, they are situating it alongside early sites in places like Syria, Israel, and Italy that date to the same formative centuries. What distinguishes Artaxata is that it emerged in a kingdom where Christianity was not just tolerated but officially embraced, which likely accelerated the move from modest house churches to monumental stone buildings.

Within Armenia itself, the sanctuary has been described as the country's oldest known church, a claim backed by the assessment that archaeologists discover Armenia's oldest church, among the oldest in the world. That status carries symbolic weight in a nation where churches dot nearly every hilltop and valley, many of them centuries old. For Armenians, identifying a specific building as the earliest known sanctuary is a way of anchoring their Christian identity in a tangible, excavated reality rather than solely in texts and tradition. It also raises the possibility that other, still-buried churches from the same era may lie beneath later structures or agricultural fields, waiting for future digs.

What the find reveals about early Christian worship and power.

For historians of religion, the Artaxata church offers more than a new entry in an architectural catalogue, it provides clues about how early Christians in Armenia organized their worship and negotiated power. The octagonal plan with a cross-shaped core suggests a liturgy that revolved around a central focal point, perhaps an altar or

reliquary, with worshippers arranged around it rather than in long rows facing a distant apse. The wooden platforms indicate differentiated roles within the congregation, hinting at a hierarchy of clergy and laity that was already taking shape in the 4th century.

At the same time, the church's location in the former royal capital and its robust construction point to strong backing from political elites who saw value in monumentalizing the new faith. Coverage of the project by the Armenian-German Artaxata Project and related reports has emphasized that the building's materials and craftsmanship match those of high-status secular architecture. That parity suggests that Christian worship was not a marginal activity but a central, state-supported function, woven into the same fabric of stone and tile that framed royal authority. In that sense, the Artaxata church stands as a physical record of how spiritual and political power fused in the world's first Christian state.