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Digging Into The Hidden Chambers of Oldest Christian Church In The World

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Archaeologists in Turkey have excavated the "world's first church." Within late Roman-era chambers they discovered smashed clay offering vessels which once held holy water.

The team of Turkish archaeologists was excavating in Antakya, formerly the ancient city of **Antioch**. Currently the capital city of Hatay Province, Turkey's southernmost province, the original settlement was founded in a fertile valley on the Orontes River about 20 kilometers from Turkey's ancient city of Antiocheia.



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Around 300 BC the city was founded by **Seleucus**, as one of the heirs to **Alexander the Great's** fragmented empire. This was but one site in what would become the Seleucid Empire, a Greek state in West Asia that existed during the **Hellenistic** Period. According to **Daily Sabah** the city flourished and under the **Romans** became incredibly wealthy and influential" in the region.

Famously, in Christian circles, it was here in Antioch that the term "Christian" was first coined - referring to followers of **Jesus Christ**. Now, for the first time, the ancient city's residential areas have been excavated revealing secrets about how the Romans worshipped at this ancient holy site.



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Being A Christian Was Dangerous Back Then

Dedicated to the first pope, **St. Peter** (Pierre), according to **UNESCO's website** "the world's very first cathedral" was expanded from a cave around 38-39 AD. The oldest surviving parts of the church date, including floor mosaics, and traces of frescoes on the right side of the altar, date to around the 4th or 5th century AD. The holy site today measures 9.5 meters (31.16 ft) wide, 13 meters (42.65 ft) long and 7 meters (22.96 ft) high.

From within the church a tunnel is accessible leading to the surrounding Mount Staurin (Mt. Starius). Archaeologists assume this tunnel once served Christian worshipers as an evacuation route should the church be raided. Husnu Isikgor, the provincial culture and tourism director, told Anadolu Agency that while this holy building is comparatively small, it is a very important place for religious tourism. St. Pierre, the world's first pope, was the founder of the Antioch Church and served as the archpriest of the first Christian community in Antioch. It is held that St. Pierre had originally worshipped in the cave that was later turned into a church, hence its historical importance.

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Diving Into The Foundations Of The World's First Church

A report in *ArchaeoNews* says a 12-strong team of archaeologists led by the *Hatay Archeology Museum* began excavating the cave Church of St. Pierre earlier in October. Legends maintain St Luke the Evangelist was the first to use the cave for Christian worship and that he gave it to the fledgling church in Antioch. Thus, the researchers were digging in what is not only the oldest church/cathedral in the world, but also the *first recorded* site of Christian pilgrimage.

Now, Ayse Ersoy, head of the Hatay Archaeology Museum, says that the recent excavations revealed "rooms and many offering vessels belonging to the settlement from the late Roman era." These recent digs represent the first scientific excavations in the residential areas of Antiocheia, said Ersoy. The archaeologists unearthed late Roman-era chambers filled with clay offering vessels. Ersoy thinks the ancient people who paid pilgrimage to the church "bought offering vessels" and filled them with holy water in the Church of St. Pierre.



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Saint Pierre's Church boosts tourism in Turkiye's Antakya



Water Was Where Devils Resided

Today, big finance has replaced Holy Water as the number one concern within the Church of Rome, but back in the initial years certain bodies of water and sources were deemed sacred. Many know of the healing powers associated with the water of Lourdes and the Jordan River, but every ancient church was built beside a waterway of some kind, whether it be a spring, river or estuary.

According to *Britannia*, in early Christian communities the baptism was given in the purest "living water" of rivers and streams which was preferred for use in baptism rituals. However, by the 16th century, water sources were becoming increasingly polluted. Ad...
baptismal font or pool were "exorcised and blessed w...
maintained they were cleansing the waters of unholy spirits, this was in reality a flight against the sickness and diseases that were being spread in contaminated water.

Therefore, the sacred water vessels discovered in the Church of St Pierre are artifacts from a time in history when Romans were increasingly seeking purified water sources. And in a world void of microscopes and bacteriology, a holy man's blessing was the best water filter available.

Top image: Excavations at the first known Christian church at Antakya, Turkey. Source: Anadolu Agency

By Ashley Cowie

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