

THE CURRENT THREAT TO CULTURAL HERITAGE IN IRAQ



A set of photographs showing the destruction of priceless statues recently shocked the world with their depictions of violence and hatred at the hands of extremists in Syria. These images are being seen as a dire warning by many historians who fear the same will soon happen in Iraq; the violence is spreading across the country and those responsible appear to have no regard for the history of the land around them. The recent advancement into Mosul, an area that is steeped in history, has many fearing for the safety of the regions cultural heritage.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has shown his level of disrespect to cultural heritage in Syria and it is only a matter of time before similar destruction is seen in Iraq.

Mosul lies at the centre of an ancient site containing 1,791 registered archaeological sites, and there are great fears for other sacred sites like the 9th century Mosque of Samarra which, despite its UNESCO status and religious significance, could also be under threat. Many key artefacts and cultural symbols have been found in the area around Mosul, some of which are of such beautiful, significant examples that they are exhibited in the British museum, and there is still plenty more to be uncovered. The problem is that many feel that these undiscovered treasures will soon be lost as these advancing rebels lay waste to the surrounding area. Furthermore, there are even clear threats to those pieces that should be safe inside Mosul's own museum. Some sites have already been destroyed, like a tomb of an Arab historian, and while some of these acts could be dismissed by some as random acts of violence, there are fears that Iraqi army operations in the area and potential bombings will cause catastrophic damage to these historical areas. Over at the museum, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has stormed the unoccupied building - which had been closed for restoration since 2003 following the previous lootings - and is putting their full collection at risk.

As if it was not heartbreaking enough for the local people that value the antiquities and the historians that worked to protect this cultural heritage that the rebels seem happy to destroy these symbols, there is another warning for Iraqis to take note of following the events in Syria. Over there, artefacts and historical items became little more than collectable, commercial goods that could be sold off for the best price to fund the campaign. Allegedly, a large portion of al-Baghdadi's great wealth comes from these black market sales, with reports of a \$2 billion war chest being partly created by sold Syrian treasures. There has been a ban on selling cultural items in Iraq since 2003 but that is unlikely to stop the rebels from trying.

How long will it be until the same happens in Mosul to the priceless pieces in their museum?

At the moment, Iraqis face an anxious wait.

Many locals feel that these sales and acts of destruction cannot be ignored because even though they may seem individual and insignificant at first, they combine to form a pattern of hatred and a real threat to the protection of the area's history and heritage. UNESCO are calling for Iraqis to protect their cultural heritage, and some are heading to Samarra with this purpose, but it is easier said than done. Rebels are occupying the museum, waiting for a simple signal to proceed; a signal that many deeply hope will never come although they greatly fear that it will.

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