

# ISIS Destroying Iraq's Cultural Heritage: UNESCO Chief

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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GR Editor's Note:

*Who is behind the Islamic State? Who is funding them? Who is involved in training them?*

*The US and its allies bear a heavy burden of responsibility in the destruction of Iraq's cultural heritage. (M.Ch. November 2, 2014)*

UNESCO chief Irina Bokova on Sunday slammed the "barbaric" destruction of Iraq's cultural heritage, as jihadists from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) group destroy age-old sites in areas they control.

Iraq has "thousands of temples, of buildings, of archaeological sites, of objects, that represent a treasure for (all) humanity," Bokova said during a visit to Baghdad.

"We cannot agree that this treasure, that this legacy of human civilization, is being destroyed in the most barbaric manner," she said.

"We have to act, we don't have time to lose, because extremists are trying to erase the identity, because they know that if there is no identity, there is no memory, there is no history, and we think this is appalling and this is not acceptable."

The extremist group spearheaded a sweeping militant offensive that has overrun much of the country, and has proceeded to destroy sites it considers idolatrous or heretical.

ISIS has destroyed shrines, churches and precious manuscripts in Mosul, Tikrit and other areas of Iraq it controls and excavated sites to sell objects abroad, in what Bokova has previously described as "cultural cleansing".

In September, officials said that ISIS militants are using intermediaries to sell priceless treasures, such as ancient Iraqi artefacts, on the black market to finance their activities.

The militants gained some experience of dealing in antiquities after taking control of large parts of Syria, but when they captured the northern Iraqi city of Mosul and the Nineveh province in June, they gained access to almost 2,000 of Iraq's 12,000 registered archaeological sites.

Speaking at a conference at the UN cultural agency UNESCO in Paris to warn of the risk to Iraq's heritage, Qais Hussein Rasheed, head of the Baghdad Museum, said organized groups were working in coordination with ISIS.

"It's an international artefacts' mafia," he told reporters. "They identify the items and say what they can sell," he said. Since some of these items were more than 2,000 years old it was difficult to know exactly their value.

Citing local officials still in ISIS-controlled areas, Rasheed said the biggest example of looting so far had taken place at the 9th century B.C. grand palace at Kalhu of the Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal II.

"Assyrian tablets were stolen and found in European cities," he said. "Some of these items are cut up and sold piecemeal," he said, referring to a tablet of a winged bull.

Artefacts were also being dug up and neighboring states such as Jordan and Turkey needed to do more to stop such items crossing their borders.

"Things are getting across our borders and into auction houses abroad," he said. "Unfortunately many of the proceeds of these artefacts will be used to finance terrorism."

In September, ISIS militants blew up a Muslim shrine and rigged one of the region's oldest churches with explosives in the Iraqi city of Tikrit .

The shrine is the reputed burial site of 40 early Muslim figures, including companions of Prophet Mohammed.

ISIS also rigged the Green Church, a striking structure carved into the rock and first built in the seventh century.

Iraq's heritage already suffered a major blow in the lawlessness and looting that followed the toppling of President Saddam Hussein by US-led forces in 2003, when looters torched buildings and ran off with treasures thousands of years old.

However, ISIS militants, whose strict Salafi interpretation of Islam deems the veneration of tombs and non-Islamic vestiges to be idolatrous, have destroyed tombs, mosques and churches and burned precious manuscripts and archives.

In attacks reminiscent of assaults on shrines in Afghanistan and Mali, militants in Mosul destroyed statues of Othman al-Mousuli, a 19th Century Iraqi musician and composer, and of Abu Tammam, an Abbasid-era Arab poet.

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