ABSTRACT:
In late February 2015, the world was shocked by a slick propaganda film in which members of the terrorist organisation, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) could be seen destroying invaluable artefacts from Iraq’s rich and diverse past in the Mosul Museum. In fact, such events are indicative of a much broader phenomenon in which groups like ISIS are actively targeting some of the world’s most important and sensitive heritage sites. In both Syria and Iraq, ISIS have been responsible for the mass looting of ancient archaeological sites and the destruction of ancient buildings and statues. They have also destroyed untold numbers of religious sites that do not conform to their strict vision including churches, mosques, shrines and temples. This paper will document some of the most extreme instances of heritage destruction undertaken by ISIS and seeks to contextualise it within the broader literature on heritage destruction. It argues that underpinning ISIS’s attacks on heritage sites is the convergence of a two-pronged ideology: sites are attacked because of their ethno-religious sectarian value (that is, the specific targeting of cultural or religious sites that symbolise the identity of a particular community), and the iconoclasm of Islamic fundamentalism (in which sites are attacked because of their supposed heresy or contradiction of strict interpretations of Islam).