

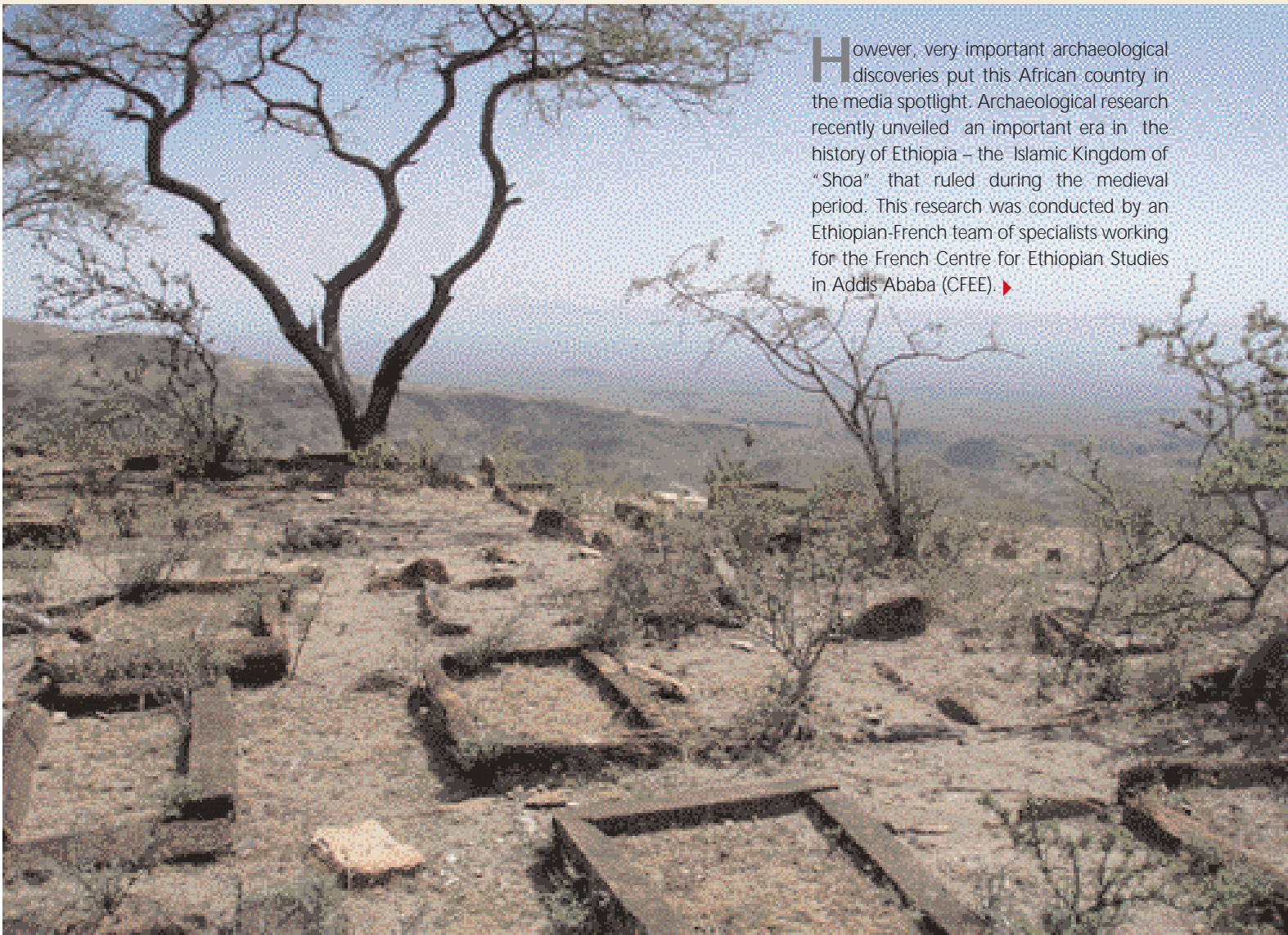
# Ethiopia:

## Virgin nature and glorious Islamic past

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The world knows about Ethiopia mainly because of tragedies well covered by the media, especially numerous wars and famines which have plagued the country for years. Sports enthusiasts know about the brilliance of the athletes especially in long distance running (Abebe Bikila, Haile Gebre Selassie, Kenenisa and Bekele). But few know about Ethiopia's tourist treasures: its nature, cultural heritage and civilization.

**H**owever, very important archaeological discoveries put this African country in the media spotlight. Archaeological research recently unveiled an important era in the history of Ethiopia – the Islamic Kingdom of “Shoa” that ruled during the medieval period. This research was conducted by an Ethiopian-French team of specialists working for the French Centre for Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa (CFEE). ▶



Cemetery/ Mesal (©CFEE)

مقبرة/ماسال



Mosque of Nora (©CFEE)

جامع نورة



Ruins/ Nora (©CFEE)

آثار / نورة

## Ethiopia? Abyssinia?

Ethiopia was known in ancient times as Abyssinia. It is a country in which early Muslims (in the seventh century AD) sought refuge to escape the cruelties of the infidels of Mecca. The name of contemporary Ethiopia, means "Burnt (or Brown) Face".

Ethiopia lies on the far eastern side of Africa in the heart of the Horn of Africa region in the vicinity of the equator. It has common borders with Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia, Kenya and Djibouti. With an area of 1,127,000 km sq and a population of 74,7 million, it is the second largest African State after Nigeria.

Ethiopia's geography varies from high mountains (where the highest summit is about 4,620m) to the low-steppe. Most regions are characterized by a tropical climate. The average temperature is between 16 and 30 degrees Celsius.

Although Ethiopia was considered the oldest Christian state, dating back to 330 AD, its population is 45% Muslims and 45% Orthodox Christian, while the Jews and other local religions make up about 10% of the population.

In economic terms, Ethiopia is one of the poor states where agriculture and animal husbandry account for about 40% of all economic activity and absorb 80% of the total workforce. Perhaps the most beautiful product of the country, and its best gift to

the world, is its high quality, internationally famous coffee.

## Kingdom of Shoa

Ongoing research culminated a few years ago, as part of the Nora excavation, with the discovery of the ruins of three cities, which helped in the identification of the geographical location of the Islamic Shoa Kingdom in the region between the 10th and 16th century AD.

This research, which was conducted by the French Centre for Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa, unearthed three old cities in the Rift valley. The valley is now covered by thick vegetation and is situated at an altitude of about 1300m. These three cities, Asbari, Mesal and Nora, provide irrefutable evidence about the existence of the Kingdom of Shoa, which controlled one of the most important trade routes of that era between the high plateaus of Ethiopia inhabited mostly by Christians and the ports of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden inhabited mostly by Muslims.

## Asbari City

The ruins of the ancient city of Asbari are spread over a wide rocky area on the eastern front of the remnants of a wall at an altitude of 1,240 meters. The most prominent remnant of this city is the mosque, one of the largest in Ethiopia.

Arabic writings can still be seen on the internal and external walls.

In addition to the Grand Mosque, several religious buildings and small mosques were discovered. There is also a graveyard containing around 100 tombs extending over several hectares on the northern side of the hill, on which the mosque is located. It is bounded by two walls from the east and north. On the western side of the site, one finds a straight wall facing north-south. It is 2m x 1m high and 4 km long.

Between this fence and the site itself, there is an area currently covered by vegetation, trees and patches that may indicate the remains of an agricultural past. The ruins of houses built close together are in the vicinity of the fence, where one can see signs of roads or paths. There are at least two fences converging at the mosque - perhaps the outer limits of the settlement.

## Mesal City

Islamic sites can also be found in the city of Mesal. They include mosques surrounded by fences and cemeteries with several thousand graves. A variety of tools made from hard black stone are distributed over this site.

The gravestones date back to the Middle Ages an era from which only a few rare documents survive. The royal status of the

tombstones is indicated by the star of the Prophet Solomon and Arabic writings.

### Nora City

Nora city rests on a hill rock, about 300 km north of Addis Ababa. Ruins reveal features of urban architecture punctuated by small roads evidenced by the remnants of stone pavements. Most houses are of a traditional rectangular form. The buildings in this residential area cannot be distinguished.

The roads going up the mountain seem more pronounced near the fence which was built with huge brick stones. We find several architectural features in a circular form: the remains of defensive fortifications in front of the city. The remnants of the city's main mosque are surrounded by walls 4 - 5 meters high. The main door of the mosque, built of wood, has miraculously remained standing for centuries. Next to the mosque are hundreds of Muslim graves. Stone and porcelain implements were also discovered at this archaeological site.

This important archaeological discovery, announced at the beginning of 2007, necessitates a review of the history of Ethiopia, which had long been described as the oldest Christian state in the world. It was believed that Islam only influenced the periphery of the country at a late stage.

However, these cities show that Islam settled in the heart of Ethiopia since its earliest times and peacefully coexisted with Christian areas.

A group of archaeologists studying human genealogy also discovered 12 skeletons that appear to be older than that of the famous "Lucy." It is hoped that the new discoveries will help scientists widen our knowledge of the ancient stages of the development of man. "Lucy" is the name given to the almost complete skeleton of the first primitive man, which was estimated at about 3.2 million years. It was discovered in Ethiopia in 1974 and proved very important in the search for mans' ancestors.

### The great Zoo

Ethiopia is an area ideal for lovers of nature and adventure tourism - those who love walks, safaris and mountaineering. It has wild areas, a variety of natural landscape and animals, and is really a great zoo with innumerable species of birds, including a rare eagle, storks and different types of ducks. There are also monkeys, crocodiles, elephants, hyenas, deer, wild pigs, rhinos, foxes etc

From the capital Addis Ababa to the Kenyan border, extends the Rift Valley. It is a rich area characterized by seven breath taking lakes,

with beautiful bird species. Some of the most important Lakes are Tana (3,600 sq km), Abijatta, Shala, Abaya, Chamo and Langano. Swimming is only possible at Langano.

Natural attractions include the Blue Nile Falls or Tississat Falls located about 45 minutes from Bahir Dar (some 300 km from Addis Ababa). The falls are 50 meters high and 400 meters wide. There are several national parks in the area including Semien, Bale and Omo.

Harar Islamic city is a unique cultural and religious attraction. It is distinguished by its fort and nearly 90 mosques (including three dating back to the 10th century AD). This ancient city, founded in the 13 century AD, is the fourth Islamic city. It was declared a world heritage site in 1996. It is located in the east of the country in a strategic region at an altitude of 1,750 meters.

The main museums are the Ethnic Museum and the National Museum. The Ethnic Museum provides an insight into the variety of handicrafts and cultural and



Asberi (©CFEE)

أسبيري



A shepherd

راعبي

artistic products of the multi-ethnic and multi-religions country. The famous 'Lucy' skeleton is in the National Museum. The infrastructure in Ethiopia may be modest but this African country is certainly worth a visit. It has a rich Islamic and Christian cultural heritage, magnificent nature and welcoming people. ■

### If you go

- Ethiopia has a mild climate and can be visited throughout the year except in June and July when rainfall is heavy.
- The best way to travel is in four-wheel-drives which can be rented cheaply.
- The departure tax is 10 Euros.
- Walks Worldwide 01524 242 000 [www.walksworldwide.com](http://www.walksworldwide.com) offer a number of expertly guided tours in Ethiopia.



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The great mosque/ Nora (©CFEE)

الجامع الكبير/ نورة