



Jerri Daboo

Ritual, Rapture and Remorse

A Study of Tarantism and *Pizzica* in Salento



Peter Lang

In the region of Salento in Southern Italy, the music and dance of the *pizzica* has been used in the ritual of tarantism for many centuries as a means to cure someone bitten by the *taranta* spider. This book, a historical and ethnographic study of tarantism and *pizzica*, draws upon seven hundred years of writings about the ritual contributed by medical practitioners, scientists, travel writers and others. It also investigates the contemporary revival of interest in *pizzica* music and dance as part of the 'neo-tarantism' movement, where *pizzica* and the history of tarantism form a complex web of place, culture and identity for Salentines today.

This is one of the first books in English to explore this fascinating ritual practice and its contemporary resurgence. It uses an interdisciplinary framework based in performance studies to ask wider questions about the experience of the body in performance, and the potential of music and dance to create a sense of personal and collective transformation and efficacy.

Jerri Daboo is a Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of Exeter. She worked as a performer and director for many years before joining the university in 2004. She has trained in acting, music and dance, and her research publications and practice focus on the body and culture in performance.



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‘To dance is to live’

ISADORA DUNCAN

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Illustration 1. Map of Salento.

Introduction

The well-known British travel writer H. V. Morton published his book *A Traveller in Southern Italy* in 1969. In this volume, he gives the following account of an event he says he witnessed on his way up the Ionian coast to Taranto, in the Southern Italian region of Apulia (Puglia):

On the way to Taranto I stopped in a small town to look at a church, and on my way back to the car I heard the sound of music. It was a quick kind of jig tune played on a fiddle, a guitar, a drum, and, I think, a tambourine. Looking round for the source of this sound, I saw a crowd standing in a side street. Glancing over the heads of the spectators, I saw a countrywoman dancing alone with a curiously entranced expression on her face, her eyes closed. She held a red cotton handkerchief in her hand which she waved as she undulated round the circle with more grace than I should have expected. I was surprised by the gravity of the crowd. There was not a smile. There was something strange about this. I wondered whether the dancer was mad, or perhaps – unusual as this would be – drunk. Glancing round at the set faces, I did not like to ask any questions, and, not wishing to intrude upon what was obviously a rather painful scene, I turned away. I shall always regret having done so.

Some days later, I recollected the dancer and happened to mention her to a friend in Taranto. ‘Do you realize what you have seen? The woman had been “taken” by a tarantula spider and she was dancing, and might dance for days until completely exhausted, to expel the poison. I have only seen this twice myself and I have lived in Salentino all my life. It is a matter of luck. Sometimes you will come across the tarantolati in village streets, at cross-roads, but generally in the houses, and though most people imagine that the tarantella ceased to be danced for serious reasons long ago, it is still danced by hundreds of peasants in the region of Lecce who believe themselves to have been poisoned by the spider.’

‘When you say the woman was “taken” by the tarantula, what do you mean?’

‘Simply that she was bitten. [...] Women are particularly exposed to tarantula bites because they work in the harvest fields after the corn has been cut, when these spiders are common.’

‘But I have read that the tarantula is not poisonous, or that it is no more dangerous than a bee-sting.’

My friend lifted his shoulders.

‘Perhaps’, he conceded. ‘This has been going on for centuries. Who can say what is at the back of it?’ (Morton, 1969: 180–1)

Morton was later informed that the woman had danced all that night and the next day, before sleeping. When she awoke, she said that she felt well again.

What Morton is describing is an example of the ritual known as tarantism, or *tarantismo* in Italian. This ritual has been performed over many centuries as a cure for someone bitten by the tarantula spider (*la taranta* in the Salentine dialect, or *la taràntola* in standard Italian). The person who is bitten, known as a *tarantato* (or *taràntolato*) if male, and *tarantata* (or *taràntolata*) if female, falls into a state of illness as a result of the poison from the bite. Symptoms can include nausea, paralysis, lethargy, spasms, headaches, irregular pulse and breathing, and fainting. If this happens, the family or friends of the *tarantata* will call for musicians who are skilled in playing an indigenous form of music called the *pizzica*. When the musicians arrive, they try out different melodies, rhythms, and types of songs until they begin to see a response from the ill person, such as the hand beginning to move in time to the music. Sometimes they will also respond to certain colours such as red, green or yellow. The particular melodies and rhythms, as well as the specific colours which affect the *tarantato*, are supposedly connected to the type and nature of the spider which bit them, so that in this way the symbol and embodiment of the spider¹ becomes the agent of both the illness and the cure.² The musicians continue to play in a crescendo, as the *tarantato* gradually becomes more and more active, seeming to 'wake up' from a state of trance, crawling along the floor, beating the ground in time to the rhythm of the *tamburello* (tambourine), sometimes arching into a bridge position, imitating the movements of a spider. As

- 1 The symbol of the spider is often an ambivalent one within mythology and folklore. It can represent cunning, fate, illusion, mystery, creativity, fertility, impregnation and death. As with snakes, spiders are sometimes seen as coming from the underworld, thus moving between the earthly and unearthly realms.
- 2 The notion of 'like cures like' is the foundation of the practice of homoeopathy. One of the homoeopathic remedies is made from the tarantula, and is used to cure extreme restlessness, hyperactivity, hysteria and convulsions. The paradigm of 'like cures like' will also be seen in Chapter Two in relation to the use of music and medicine to balance the humours in the body.

the music rises, the *tarantato* gets up from the floor, and begins to dance in hopping, skipping and circling movements, the musicians encouraging them to keep going. They may continue this for many hours before resting, and then beginning the dance again. The ritual can last for three days, until the *tarantato* feels well again, and does not need to dance any longer. The bite led to the *tarantato* being 'possessed' by the spider, and the cure is one of a fight with this possession which leads to the expelling of the spirit of the spider from the body. If this does not happen, or if the music and dance cure is not undertaken, then the *tarantato* may die from the effects of the bite. In this way, the ritual is often described as being one of both possession and exorcism.

As well as this private ritual, there was a more public and collective display caused by the symptoms of the condition reoccurring, usually during the summer months, and often around the period of the festival of St Paul on 29 June. As discussed in Chapter Two, St Paul is associated with the ritual of tarantism. The chapel dedicated to him in Galatina became the focus for the annual repetition of the cure, where the *tarantati* (male and collective plural) would be brought by their families from surrounding areas to relive the dance of the ritual cure within the chapel. Oral, written and film records give examples of *tarantate* (female plural)³ dressed in white, symbolically becoming the brides of St Paul, dancing in the chapel, climbing over the altar, crawling on the ground, and sometimes attacking the crowds who gathered to witness the spectacle during the annual repetition. In the same way as the spider is the cause and cure of the condition, so St Paul also becomes a magical-religious symbol who both curses and heals the *tarantata*. Chapter One contains an ethnographic 'moment' of my experience of the festival of St Paul in Galatina in 2008, where the

3 Throughout its history, there have been cases of both men and women undertaking the ritual. In Chapter Two, I discuss the 'feminisation' of tarantism, with an emphasis on the women who became *tarantate*. Partly because of this discussion, and also due to the particular changes in socio-cultural circumstances for women in Salento, there is a tendency for this study to focus on the *tarantate*. However, this does not deny or ignore that men have become *tarantati*, and this will also be seen during the discussion of the historical documents in Chapter Two.

sacred and secular intersected, and the brief glimpse of a former *tarantata* affected all those watching, bringing the past histories into collision with contemporary identities and practices.

Throughout its history, there have been questions as to whether the condition of tarantism is ‘real’ or not, and if the *tarantata* is ‘faking’ rather than being genuinely ill, or even in a state of madness or hysteria. Although there is often no evidence of an actual bite from a spider,⁴ the ‘bite’ and subsequent illness and cure can be seen as a culture-specific means of coping with socio-cultural and economic difficulties found within Salento. As Horden states,

the spider’s symbolism is more potent than its bite [...]. We are dealing with a culture-bound syndrome, or folk illness; with social and psychological ‘poisoning’ rather than a biological threat. (Horden, 2000: 250)

In this way, it is important to frame tarantism as being a culture-specific phenomenon.

There have been records of the use of music to cure the poison from the bite of a tarantula dating back to the fourteenth century.⁵ These records,

- 4 The dialect word ‘*la taranta*’ can be used to describe not only a tarantula, but any type of spider or scorpion which inflicts a poisonous bite. It can even include other types of biting insects, such as ants, as well as snakes and vipers. There have been recorded incidents of tarantism being induced by all these types of venomous bites. There are two types of spider that have been prevalent in Salento which have been discussed in relation to tarantism. One is the *lycosa tarantula*, or wolf spider, which is considered to be harmless. The other is the much smaller *latrodectus tredecimguttatus*, or European black widow spider. Though less fearsome to look at in comparison to the *lycosa*, it is the bite from this spider that can cause symptoms similar to those found in tarantism. As the *lycosa* appears larger and more menacing, it is often this species that is seen to be the spider that is the cause of the illness, even though its bite would not result in the same adverse effects as those from the bite of the *latrodectus*. In this way, the symbol of *la taranta* can be seen as a combination of the appearance and effects of both *lycosa* and *latrodectus* (Bartholomew, 2000; Lewis, 1991; Lüdtke, 2009; De Martino, 2005).
- 5 Although this study is focusing on the phenomenon of tarantism within Apulia, there are records of its occurring in other locations, particularly in the South of Italy, as

some of which are discussed in Chapter Two of this book, are written by an array of doctors, scientists, ecclesiastical figures and curious visitors, each imposing their own viewpoint on the condition, defining the ritual and those who undertake it according to their own paradigm of seeing and understanding the world. As such, what these records offer is a fascinating debate on the shifting discourses of the body, medicine, science, religion and philosophy over a period of seven hundred years. What is not heard are the voices of the *tarantati* themselves. Their own stories, and their personal experiences of the performance of the ritual, are not overtly visible, but they are rather appropriated and debated by the writers as a means for expounding their own framework of thought. The ritual itself began to decline during the nineteenth century, and by the middle of the twentieth century, and at the time that Morton was writing, there were only a few instances of performances of the ritual. According to anthropologist Karen Lüdtke, who has undertaken a long-term ethnographic study of contemporary Salento, there were only five or six former *tarantati* still alive in 2006 (Lüdtke, 2009: 12), though these are not seen publicly performing the ritual any longer. However, the occasional glimpses of one of these prior *tarantati* can recall a past into the present, offering a glimpse of a vestige from older times that has a strong resonance for the younger generation of Salentines today, an example of which is described in Chapter One.

Although the ritual as such no longer takes place, there was a revival of interest in *pizzica* music and dance beginning in the 1970s, and gaining momentum through the 1980s and 1990s. This, along with an increasing amount of research and publications on tarantism, has led to a growth in both tourists and researchers visiting the region, as well as the development of music and dance festivals, sometimes under the label of the so-called 'neo-tarantism' movement. This resurgence, which is discussed in Chapter Four, offers an example of the revival or reinvigoration of a form of 'folk' or 'traditional' music and dance, which raises questions of authenticity, ownership, and performance forms as cultural products. Above all, the

well as in Spain. For an account of medical histories of tarantism within Spain during the eighteenth century, see León Sanz, 2000, and Doménech y Amaya, 1998.

case study of both historical and contemporary Salento shows the complex relationship of past and present, and a multiple layering of times, places, practices and identities in each of the 'moments' explored in this study. History should not be seen as a single, linear trajectory, with a clear origin and straight line to the present, but rather as many histories, often contradictory, which contribute to the wider understanding of the development of the ritual and performance forms. Likewise, a place or site cannot be seen without reference to both the histories and socio-cultural conditionings of which it is formed, as well as the embodied presences of those who are playing the music and dancing within it. It is their actions that are creating the experience of the site, as much as the site is informing their experience of the performance.

This book offers an overview of both the history of tarantism, and the contemporary phenomenon of neo-tarantism and performances of *pizzica* within Salento today, and questions the connections between them. Although there have been many studies written about each of these, though very few in English, none has yet undertaken an extended discussion and comparison of both to the extent placed within this book. Additionally, most of these contemporary studies, either reviewing the historical documents or conducting field research, have tended to be situated within the fields of anthropology and ethnography, cultural studies, history, sociology and the medical sciences. What I am hoping to contribute in this book is a perspective on both past and present through the discipline of performance studies. By its nature interdisciplinary, this will allow for a focus on both my historical and ethnographic research, as well as on the performance forms themselves, partly through the use of the understanding of the performance experience found in the work of a range of performance practitioners. In particular, there is an emphasis in my approach on attempting to understand these phenomena through the body, and the processes of embodiment and experience of those who undertake the performances. This notion of embodiment encompasses both a phenomenological, or 'inner', experience, as well as an understanding of the socio-cultural and historical 'outer' environment. My attention lies on the inherent interconnection between the two, on how they operate together to generate the particular nature of the experience in the specific spatial-temporal moment of the

presence within the action of the music and dance. This focus on the body and embodiment has the potential to offer new insights into an understanding of the experience of both the historical ritual and contemporary expressions. Such insights may be of benefit to those working in the social sciences, who can find the use of such notions as 'presence' and 'liveness' difficult to incorporate in their own work, as discussed in Chapter One. In this way, I hope that this book will contribute to the study of tarantism and *pizzica* in Salento that has already been undertaken, and perhaps provide new frameworks of thought that can be of use beyond this in a wider context of the study of ritual, efficacy and experience in forms of cultural performance.

Book structure, problems and ethics

The remainder of the Introduction offers a brief contextualisation of the land of Salento; its history and mixture of cultures, and its positioning within Southern Italy in relation to the idea of the 'Southern Question', magic and superstition. There is also a discussion of *pizzica*, and a description of the dance and music of the social form, the *pizzica pizzica*, as well as a brief exploration of the differences between this and the 'tarantella'.

The book is divided into four chapters. As the intention is to provide an interdisciplinary approach to its subject matter, Chapter One offers an examination of the methodological frameworks that will be used. Based in performance studies, and drawing on other disciplines including anthropology, sociology and cultural studies, there is a discussion of the importance of exploring tarantism and *pizzica* through the embodied experience of the participants, whilst also having an understanding of how the specific socio-cultural positionings of the individual and community will have an impact on this experience. Culture is seen as something that is inscribed on and in the body, as well as in the process of the embodiment of the ritual in the past, and the contemporary experiences of playing and dancing *pizzica*.

today. The chapter ends with an ethnographic ‘moment’ of my observation and participation in the festival of St Paul in Galatina in June 2008, to illustrate the points made.

Chapters Two, Three and Four are a chronological examination of the history of the ritual of tarantism, and the revival of interest in *pizzica* music and dance leading to the ‘neo-tarantism’ movement in the late twentieth century. Chapter Two is an extensive historical overview of the many and diverse writings on tarantism by doctors, scientists and travel-writers from the fourteenth through to the twentieth centuries. These writings demonstrate the appropriation of both tarantism and those who perform it in a gradual medicalisation, feminisation and christianisation of the ritual. The documents discussed offer a fascinating account of the changing attitudes towards the body, religion, medicine and science over the periods examined, most particularly from the vast paradigm shift brought about by the Age of Enlightenment.

Chapter Three focuses on the work of Italian historian Ernesto De Martino, whose book *La terra del rimorso* [*The Land of Remorse*] is so significant in the history and changing views of tarantism in the twentieth century. De Martino conducted an ethnographic study of tarantism in 1959 for which he gathered an interdisciplinary team to examine features of the ritual. The title is a play on words, for ‘*morso*’ is the Italian word for ‘bite’, hence ‘*ri/re-morso*’ has the sense of both ‘remorse’ in a religious context, and ‘re-bite’ in terms of the *tarantati* re-experiencing the symptoms of tarantism and needing to repeat the cure each year. This book has been of great importance in reframing the understanding of tarantism and cultural practices in Southern Italy; however, it has also been criticised more recently for its reductionist approach, despite De Martino’s own development of the notion of ‘critical ethnocentrism’. This chapter examines some of De Martino’s key ideas, and how these were framed in his writing on tarantism, as well as ways in which his work has been used by others in different contexts, and some of the critiques that have been made of his approach. I then offer an examination of the experience of the ritual through aspects of performance studies. The purpose of this is to suggest ways of exploring the ritual through the body and the processes of embodiment, and aims to provide a framework to discuss such issues as ‘presence’, ‘liveness’ and

‘embodied experience’ in relation to forms of cultural performance, whilst also needing to take account of the particular socio-cultural features of tarantism in its specific context.

Chapter Four is an examination of the revival of interest in *pizzica* music and dance which began in the 1970s, and the development of the neo-tarantism movement. This covers a range of areas including the sense of local identity in relation to the music and dance, as well as the history of Salento and a connection to the land, and how these are manifested in the present; the notion of ‘neo-’ traditions; the development of new music and dance festivals as part of the burgeoning tourist industry; and the debate between authenticity and contamination which is often central to the idea of ‘revival’. There is also a discussion of the *pizzica scherma* and its performance at the festival of San Rocco in Torrepaduli. Although this may not be seen as necessarily having a direct connection to tarantism, this unique form of dance contributes to the overall debate on contemporary Salento. It is a fascinating combination of martial arts and dance, performed by different communities, and can be a means to resolve disputes through the space of the *ronda*, the circle in which the dance is performed. There has been very little written about this in English, so this section investigates the history of the *scherma*, as well as analysing some of the movements of the dance.

The Conclusion brings together some of the ideas and themes from throughout the book, questioning what the notion of ‘healing’ might mean in the different contexts discussed.

With a book of this nature, which offers both an historical and ethnographic study of a specific location over a long period of time, there are many considerations which are involved. I first encountered tarantism as a practitioner in January 2000 when making a piece of dance-theatre, and this initial interest led to further research and visiting Salento for the first time in 2001. This research, both documentary and field trips, has continued over the years and contributed to the writing of this book. Having been initially introduced into Salento as a practitioner, and then occupying a shifting role into being a researcher, there have clearly been ethical issues which I have had to address. In the context of the research and writing of this book, when undertaking field studies I see myself as being a participant-observer, and have been very fortunate in my encounters

with local people who have been immensely generous both with their time in conducting interviews, as well as their skill and openness with playing and dancing the *pizzica*. There have been times when I have felt that being seen as a practitioner as well as an 'academic', thereby joining in with the playing and dancing, as well as sharing my own practical work, has perhaps led some informants to being more open with me than might have been the case otherwise. Therefore, it has also been important to be clear about the times when I am gathering information for the book, and how I am going to use this material. The shifting position between practitioner and researcher has proved both interesting, and at times difficult: when do I put down the camera at a festival and join in the dance? It is my hope that my understanding of music and dance from both an academic as well as practical perspective,⁶ will offer an interesting viewpoint to the discussion. I note in Chapter Two that during the time of the early Christian Church, the playing of music became separated from its study and understanding. I would like to suggest that within academia today, it is possible and useful for this division to be reconsidered, and that it can be acknowledged that a practitioner can think and write, and that an academic can engage with practice. With an increasing number of practitioners entering academia in the fields of performance, there seems to be a great opportunity for this form of interrelated dialogue, understanding and approach to be undertaken and accepted.

Although I have conducted field research at points over a period of eight years, there is never a sense that this is 'enough', either in terms of time, or the range and breadth of people I have interviewed, and the places and events I have visited. Nevertheless, I trust that the amount of time I have spent in Salento is sufficient for the purposes of this book, and that the field work will continue, leading to further discoveries. The historical research for this study has encompassed the whole of Apulia, including

6 I have a BA in Drama and Music from the University of Bristol, and an MA in Physical Theatre from the University of Surrey and Royal Holloway, University of London, which included studying dance anthropology. I have trained in and practised a range of forms of theatre, dance and music, and therefore move between and across these performance forms in my academic and practical work.

the important sites of Taranto and Brindisi in the history of tarantism. However, my field research is centred on Salento, partly in order to create a focused area for study, and also as this is where so much of the contemporary revival has taken place.

In terms of language, I have chosen mainly to use English translations of Italian places and words, for example Apulia for Puglia. I have also decided to place the Italian text of quotations first, followed by the English translation. This seemed very important in relation to using material from interviews with informants; I wanted their voice in the original language to be heard first, and for the sake of consistency, this practice is followed throughout the book. Therefore, the English translations are placed in square brackets afterwards. Unless otherwise stated, I have undertaken these translations myself, with help from Bianca Mastrominico, John Dean and Antonella Rizzo. However, I have made the final decisions on the English versions myself, and I take full responsibility and apologise for any errors or misunderstandings with the translations as a result.

The study of tarantism and *pizzica*, and the research and writing for this book, have embraced and engulfed me for the past nine years. I hope that this book may spark interest in the reader for further research of their own, and encourage the first-hand reading of the texts discussed, as well as personal experience of the music, dance, culture and people of Salento. I have only been able to offer my own glimpse into this rich world, and many other views are available.

Context and background: Salento and *pizzica* in perspective

Where worlds collide: Salento as a site for study

In this land whose name means ‘never-ending silence’ and ‘land between two seas’, the ancient and the modern blend together. Land of sea, land of different peoples, dialects, voices that cover the echo of other voices, other sounds. [...] We must find the right time, the right shades of colours in the sky where the crescent Turkish moon

is a white, dazzling comma on a carpet of lights, and when the north wind blows the horizon is clear on the coast looking over the East. (From the tourist brochure 'Salento: all year round', produced by Viaggiare and the Azienda di Promozione Turistica di Lecce, Apulia, 2008)

Salento is indeed the 'land between two seas', and one that faces and inhabits both 'West' and 'East' in its geography, history and culture. However, this is far too simplistic a duality for the complexity and layerings found within this comparatively small area. The region of Apulia covers the 'heel' of the 'boot' of Italy, and Salento lies in the bottom half of this 'heel' (see Illustration 1). It is also known as the Province of Lecce which, along with the Provinces of Brindisi, Taranto, Foggia, and Bari, make up the region of Apulia. This is part of the South of Italy which is also known the *Mezzogiorno*, *Italia Meridionale* or *Meridione*. Salento covers an area of approximately 2,500 square km, a narrow peninsula at the tip of Western Europe, with 200 km of coastline, ending at its bottom point in the town of Santa Maria di Leuca, also known as *Finibus Terrae*, or the end of the earth. To the east is the Ionian Sea, and to the west, the Adriatic. The coastline is a combination of rocky cliffs, sandy beaches, and deep caves, some of which contain the remains from previous civilisations. The land in-between the seas is mainly a flat plain, home to the region's main traditional industry of agriculture, with an abundance of olive groves, grape vines and almond trees. Hundreds of kilometres of dry-stone walls snake the landscape, interspersed with *masserie*, farm buildings, and more glimpses of past inhabitants in the shape of dolmens and menhirs. As well as rural hamlets and villages, Salento hosts some larger towns and cities, including the region's capital Lecce, also known as 'the Florence of the South' for the splendour of its seventeenth-century Baroque architecture, designed by Francesco and Giuseppe Zimbalo, and Cesare Penna, amongst others. As the former Roman settlement of Lupiae, the *centro storico* also contains a large amphitheatre, only part of which has been excavated, as well as a smaller Roman theatre where performances still take place. The statue of one of the city's patron saints, San Oronzo, stands on a tall column that was once part of the Appian Way, which ended near Brindisi.

As well as agriculture, one of the other important Salentine industries, that of fishing, is found along the coastline, and the two ports of Gallipoli on the west and Otranto on the east act as both gateway and guard to the two-way facing peninsula, which has seen many invasions from both directions. Otranto lies only 70 km by sea from Albania, and contains evidence of the many cultures that have lived there, with a Norman cathedral which has a Romanesque facade, an Aragonese Castle, a Byzantine Church, and white-washed houses reminiscent of Greek villages amongst narrow streets, winding up from the harbour. It was in Otranto in 1480 that Mehmed II's Ottoman soldiers landed and attacked the city. When eight hundred of the inhabitants refused to convert, they were decapitated on top of Minerva Hill. Alfonso of Aragon managed to liberate the city the following year, and the bones of the martyrs now lie for viewing in the chapel of the cathedral in the city. This cathedral also houses an extraordinary mosaic floor, made by the monk Pantaleo in the twelfth century, which covers the aisle and transepts of the building. The central feature which runs along the middle from the doorway to the altar consists of the image of the Tree of Life. Branching out from this are a mixture of images taken from Greek mythology, the Bible, mythological legends such as King Arthur, the signs of the Zodiac, and real and fabulous animals including elephants, lions, centaurs and unicorns. This floor seems to symbolise the merging of different peoples, cultures and stories which is so much a feature of the land of Salento, and indeed of the passageway of the Mediterranean itself, where people and worlds collide, whether in war, colonisation, trade, marriage, or artistic exchange, creating a mixing-pot of diverse and shifting cultures and identities (see Illustration 2 for some images of Lecce, Santa Maria di Leuca, and Otranto).

The Mediterranean, or 'Middle Sea', has operated as a linking point, the central passageway between different lands. The Romans called it *Mare Nostrum*, or 'Our Sea', and for Horden and Purcell in their extraordinary history of the Mediterranean, *The Corrupting Sea*, this 'claim of the Romans to 'their' sea was part of a political and cultural process by which they progressively defined the place of Rome at the heart of the Inhabited World – an *Oecumene* or *Orbis Terrarum* with the Mediterranean at its centre' (Horden and Purcell, 2000: 12). Certainly for the many empires



Illustration 2. Clockwise from top left: the castle in Otranto; the Roman amphitheatre in Lecce; a detail of the Baroque ornamentation on the rose window from the Basilica di Santa Croce, Lecce; the caves at Santa Maria di Leuca, or *Finibus Terrae*.
(Photographs: Jerri Daboo)

and cultures which have been based on its shores, the Mediterranean acts as the connector and travel-way between not just countries, but continents. For Horden and Purcell, in 'the ancient geographical tradition the sea shapes the land, not the other way about' (ibid.: 11). Abulafia states that this 'fundamental geographical feature of the Mediterranean is thus the enormous complexity of the region. Complexity means richness, diversity in a very positive sense, facilitating exchanges over short and long distances' (Abulafia, 2003: 19).