

AGRIGENTO  
The Temple of Concord.



# Agrigento

Once a prosperous ancient Greek city, Agrigento (*map p. 571, C3*) presents a remarkable series of Doric temples of the 5th century BC. On a higher ridge, the site of the ancient acropolis, stands the medieval and modern town, overlooking a valley which stretches towards the sea.



## HISTORY OF AGRIGENTO

Agrigento, the *Akragas* of the Greeks and the *Agrigentum* of the Romans, claims Daedalus as its legendary founder, but seems almost certainly to have originated in 580 BC as a colony of Gela. An early ruler was the tyrant Phalaris. The 6th–5th-century BC poet Pindar described Akragas as ‘the fairest city of mortals’, and some of its citizens were renowned for their wealth—a certain Gellias, during a storm, offered hospitality, new clothes and stabling to a group of 500 horsemen heading for Gela. Akragas was the birthplace of the philosopher Empedocles and his follower Akron.

In 406 BC the Carthaginians captured the city after an eight-month siege, burnt it, and sold the inhabitants as slaves. Timoleon defeated the Carthaginians (340) and rebuilt the city but it was taken by the Romans in 261 and again in 210, and remained in their possession until the fall of the Empire. It fell to the Arabs in AD 828, who cultivated cotton, sugar cane and mulberries for the silk industry: trade flourished so much that the old port (now San Leone) at the mouth of the River Akragas was abandoned in favour of the larger, deeper harbour at Porto Empedocle. Count Roger’s Normans arrived in 1087 and took the city after a pitiless siege of 116 days, depriving the inhabitants of any kind of food, to the point that they resorted to cannibalism. But after the surrender the city was rebuilt, and the bishopric was founded.

The present town was long known as Girgenti, deriving from *Kerkent*, an Arabic corruption of the Roman *Agrigentum*, meaning ‘People of the Fields’. The name Girgenti was abandoned in 1927 on the orders of Mussolini.

The west façade, facing Piazza Guglielmo, is flanked by two square towers (one incomplete) linked by an 18th-century marble porch. The fine portal has a beautiful bronze door signed by Bonanno da Pisa (1186). The usual entrance is beneath the portico along the north side, facing Piazza Vittorio Emanuele with its Triton fountain by Mario Rutelli. The portico was built in 1547–69 by Gian Domenico and Fazio Gagini, and is complete with benches. The entrance portal has a mosaic frieze and a wonderful bronze door by Barisano da Trani (1179).

### CONSTRUCTION OF THE CATHEDRAL

William II needed to create a new archbishopric and ensure the sympathy of its new incumbent in order to counterbalance the power of his former tutor, the English archbishop of Palermo, Walter of the Mill, who was supported by the papacy. By handing over the cathedral to the Cluniac Benedictines, the king made a clever move: the abbot was automatically an archbishop in rank and his appointment needed no further approval, either from the pope or from the clerics in Sicily, and the French monks had no sympathy for Walter or for the Vatican. The king justified the enormous expenditure of this project by telling of a dream he had while sleeping under a carob tree during a hunting expedition. The Madonna appeared to him and told him to dig under the tree and use the treasure he would find there to build her a great church.

The mosaics were made with pure gold. Hundreds of the finest craftsmen from Constantinople were employed at great expense to expedite the work. The monolithic granite columns that separate the nave from the aisles are from a temple or temples of the Roman era. The slender marble columns in the cloisters are also Roman in origin, believed by some scholars to have been brought here by the Benedictine monks from the sunken city of *Baia*, near Naples. There they may once have formed the portico of a villa: some, especially on the east side, show traces of having spent years under the sea, the marble bored in places by a type of mussel, the sea-date (*Lithophaga mytiloides*). *Baia*, being subject to a volcanic phenomenon which causes the area to rise and sink alternately, may have been easily accessible at the time of the cloister's construction.

### Interior of the cathedral

The interior (102m by 40m), remarkably simple in design but glittering with golden and coloured mosaics covering a surface of over 6400 square metres, gives an immediate impression of majesty and splendour. The concept is similar to the Cappella Palatina in Palermo but the design is carried out on a much greater scale. Beyond the rectangular crossing, surmounted by a high lantern, with shallow transepts, is a deep presbytery with three apses, recalling the plan of Cluniac abbey churches. The stilted arches in the nave are carried on 18 slender columns with composite capitals, of Roman origin and all of granite except the first on the south side, which is of cipollino marble. The ceiling of the nave was restored after a fire in 1811, and then again in the 1980s when the 19th-century timber proved to be full of termites; that of the choir bears the stamp of Arab workmanship.



MONREALE

Detail of St Eustace from the north door of the cathedral by Barisano da Trani (1179).

### The mosaics

The magnificent series of mosaics tell in pictures the stories of the Old and New Testaments (binoculars are useful to see the details, particularly of those higher up). It is not known whether only Greek, or local craftsmen trained by Byzantine artists, were involved in this remarkable project, and the exact date of its completion is uncertain (though it is thought to have been around 1182). The large scenes chosen to illustrate the theme of Christ's Ascension and the Assumption of the Virgin fit an overall scheme designed to celebrate the Norman monarchy and to emphasise its affinity with Jerusalem. Under the rich decoration of the upper walls runs an elegant marble and mosaic dado in Arab style.

**Nave:** Above the arcade the Genesis cycle begins in a double tier, starting with the upper row at the eastern end of the south side with the Creation and continuing round the western wall and along the northern side to end (on the lower tier) with *Jacob's Dream* and *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*.

**Crossing and transepts:** The story of Christ is illustrated from the *Nativity* to the *Passion*. The piers in the transept are covered on all sides with tiers of saints.

**Aisles:** The Ministry of Christ.

**Presbytery:** On either side are scenes from the lives of Sts Peter and Paul, whose figures are represented in the side apses. In the main apse is the mighty half-length figure of Christ Pantocrator, with a solemn and rather severe expression. Below is the enthroned Madonna, with angels and apostles, and lower still, on either side of the east window, figures of saints including Thomas Becket, made within ten years of his martyrdom; Henry II of England, Becket's nemesis, was William II's father-in-law. Above the original royal throne (left) *William II Receives*

## LA ZISA & THE WEST OF TOWN

The palace of La Zisa (*map 9; open Tues–Sun and holidays 9–1.15 & 2–6.15, Mon mornings only; T: 091 652 0269*) takes its name from the Arabic *al-aziz*, meaning magnificent. It is the most important secular monument of Arab-Norman architecture to survive in Sicily, and is purely Islamic in inspiration. La Zisa was one of a group of palaces built by the Norman kings in their private park of Genoard (used as a hunting reserve) on the outskirts of Palermo. It was begun by William I c. 1164–5 and completed by his son. The palace is known to have been used by Frederick II, but it was already in disrepair in the late 13th century. It was fortified by the Chiaramontes in the 14th century. By the 16th century it was in a ruined state and was drastically reconstructed by the Spanish Sandoval family, who owned it from 1635 to 1806. It was expropriated by the Sicilian government in 1955, but then abandoned until part of the upper floors collapsed in 1971. After years of neglect, a remarkable restoration programme was begun in 1974 and it was finally opened to the public in 1990. The structure had to be consolidated throughout, but the astonishing architecture has been preserved. As a finishing touch, the magnificent gardens were imaginatively re-created, with lily ponds, fountains and walks, but unfortunately they were then totally neglected and are now ruined.

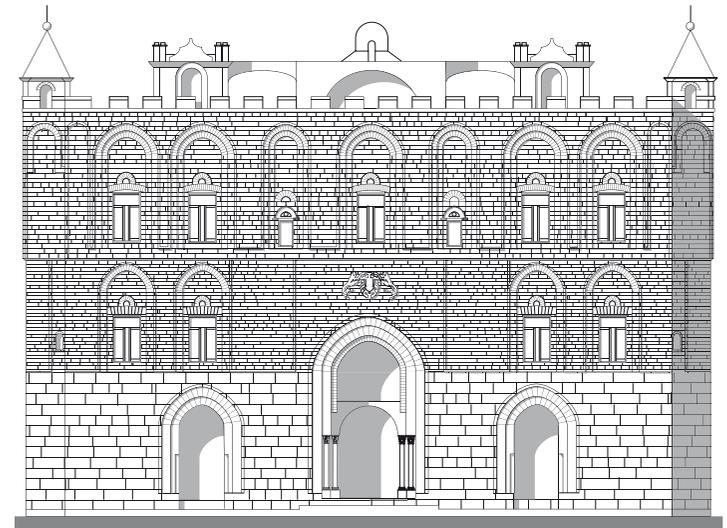
### Exterior of La Zisa

The fine exterior has a symmetrical design, although the double-light windows on the upper floors were all destroyed in the 17th century by the Sandoval family, who set up their coat of arms on the façade and altered the portico. In King William's day the sandstone was faced with plaster decorated in a red and white design. The small pond outside, formerly part of the gardens, collected the water from the fountain in the ground-floor hall, which was fed by a nearby Roman aqueduct. A damaged inscription in Kufic letters at the top of the east façade has not yet been deciphered.

### Interior of La Zisa

The beautiful interior is on three floors. The exceptionally thick outer walls (1.9m on the ground floor), the original small windows and a system of air vents kept the palace protected from the extremes of hot and cold. The rooms were all vaulted: the square rooms with cross vaults and the oblong rooms with barrel vaults. Amphorae were used in the vault construction to take the weight of the foundations of the floors above. Some of the vaults have had to be reconstructed in reinforced concrete. The floors (very few of the originals remain) were of tiles laid in a herring-bone pattern, except for the ground-floor hall which was in marble. The miniature *muqarnas* which decorate niches in some of the rooms, and the recesses of many of the windows, are borrowed from Arab architecture.

On the ground floor are explanatory plans and a display illustrating the history of the building. A model in Plexiglass shows the parts where it had to be reconstructed and where iron girders have been inserted to reinforce the building. The small chambers here were originally service rooms or for the use of court dignitaries. The splendid



LA ZISA

central hall, used for entertainments, has niches with stalactite vaults. Around the walls runs a mosaic frieze which expands into three ornamental circles in the central recess.

The Norman mosaics (which recall those in King Roger's Room in Palazzo dei Normanni) show Byzantine, Islamic and even Frankish influences. A fountain gushed from the opening surmounted by the imperial eagle in mosaic and flowed down a runnel towards the entrance to be collected in the fish pond outside. A majolica floor survives here and the faded frescoes were added in the 17th century. The little columns have beautiful capitals. On the inner side of the entrance arch is a damaged 12th-century inscription in large stucco letters.

Two symmetrical staircases (replaced by modern iron stairways) led up to the first floor. Here the living-rooms are connected by a corridor along the west front. Numerous fine vaults survive, and a series of air vents. Medieval Egyptian objects, including metalwork, ceramics and wooden lattice-work window screens, are displayed in some of the rooms, as well as amphorae found in the vaulting. On the top floor is a remarkable central hall with columns and water channels which was originally an open atrium surrounded by loggias, used in the summer. The small rooms on either side were probably a harem.

## AROUND LA ZISA

To the north of the Zisa, on the corner of Via Whitaker, is a church which incorporates the **Norman chapel of the SS. Trinità**, built at the same time as the palace (*part of the Circuito Arte Sacra; see p. 77*). At the south edge of Piazza Zisa is the 17th-century church of the **Annunziata**, with Sandoval family monuments.

### CHILD SACRIFICE AMONG THE CARTHAGINIANS

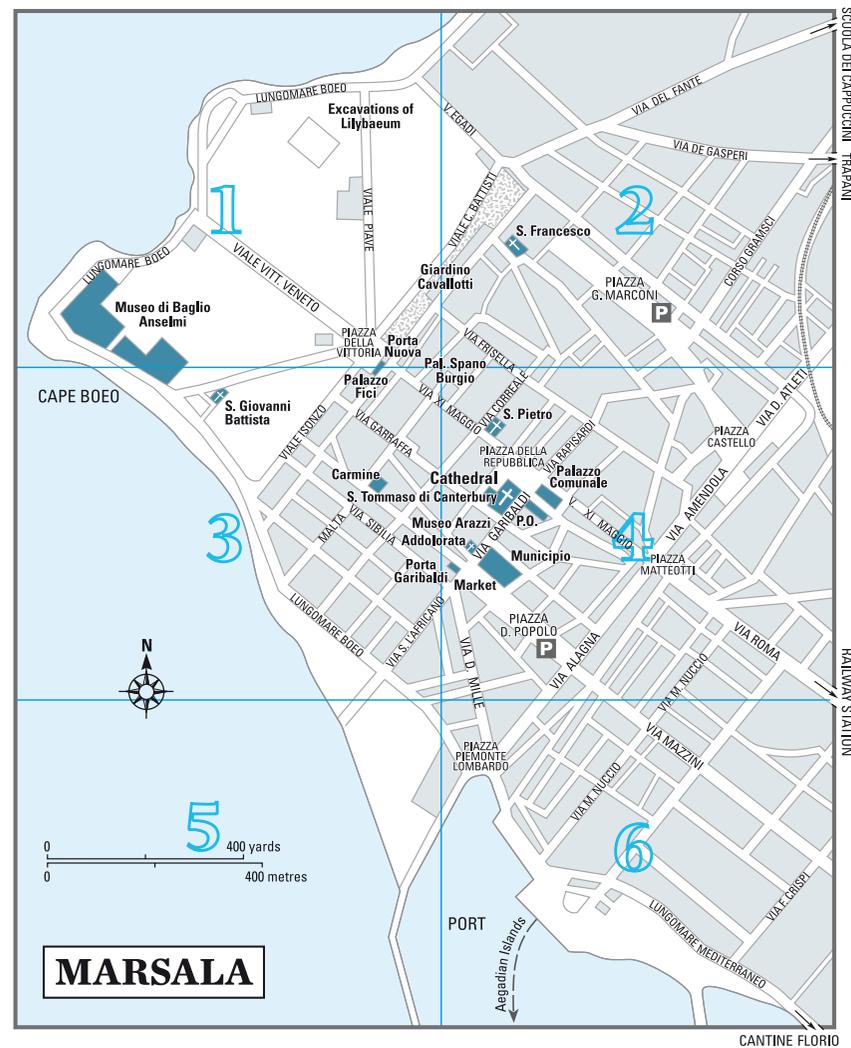
The Tophet is infamous for being the location where the Punic peoples occasionally sacrificed their own children to the gods. Over the years, many people have refused to accept that this actually happened, electing to blame the Greek and Roman authors who report it for concocting the slur in order to justify the costly wars that they fought against the Punic populations, and Carthage in particular. However, recent groundbreaking work by a European team of researchers appears to have proved beyond doubt that child sacrifice was indeed carried out here, and that it did not simply rely on the use of already dying or dead infants. Drawing together the literary, archaeological, osteological and epigraphical evidence, it is clear that some members of the Punic societies did kill their own young children, to fulfil a promise that had already been made to the gods in return for divine favours. Due to the costly ritual that it involved, this practice was probably restricted to the wealthier members of society and the numbers sacrificed would have been relatively small. This nevertheless makes it no less horrifying when we contemplate such an idea today.

## MARSALA

Marsala (*map p. 575, B2*) is a pleasant town with a neat city centre and an attractive open seafront on Capo Boeo, the site of the Carthaginian city of Lilybaeum. The town gives its name to a famous dessert wine still produced here in large quantities from the vineyards along the coast.

### HISTORY OF MARSALA

Lilybaeum, founded by the Carthaginians in 396 BC, became their strongest bulwark in Sicily after the sack of Motya in 397 BC. It succumbed to the Romans only after a siege of ten years (250–241 BC). During the Second Punic War, Scipio (later to be named Africanus) set sail from Lilybaeum on his way to defeat Hannibal near Carthage at the Battle of Zama (202 BC). As the seat of the Roman governor of Sicily, the city reached the zenith of its importance. Cicero, made quaestor here in 75 BC, called it '*civitas splendidissima*'. In 47 BC Julius Caesar also pitched camp here on his way to Africa. A *municipium* during the Augustan age, it was later raised to the status of *colonia*. It kept its importance as an avenue of communication with Africa during the Saracen dominion under the name *Marsa Ali*, Harbour of Ali, but declined after 1574 when Don Juan of Austria (illegitimate son of Charles V) almost completely blocked its port to protect it from Barbary pirates. The famous Marsala wine trade dates from the late 18th century (*see p. 163*). Garibaldi and the 'Thousand' landed here on 11th May 1860, being unobtrusively assisted by two British warships which had officially been assigned to protect the wine merchants. In 1943, Marsala was heavily damaged by Allied air attacks during preparations for Operation Husky.



### PORTA GARIBALDI TO THE CATHEDRAL

The centre of town is entered from the port and southwest by the monumental **Porta Garibaldi** (*map 3–4*), formerly the Porta di Mare, reconstructed in 1685. On the left is the church of the **Addolorata**, with a fine circular domed 18th-century interior. In the apse is a cypress-wood statue (1790) of the Madonna wearing a black cloak. Opposite, municipal offices occupy a restored 16th-century military building, behind which is the market square. Via Garibaldi continues to the central **Piazza della Repubblica**

Today the lake has no visible inlet or outlet and is apparently disappearing, perhaps because building activity nearby has damaged its underground sources. The vegetation on the shores, as well as the bird-life, have suffered greatly since the 1950s, when it was decided to build a motor-racing track around it. Paradoxically, the lake is a nature reserve (run by the Azienda Forestale).

### DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE

The goddess Demeter, patroness of the sowing of seed and the harvesting of corn, was already ancient when Homer celebrated her in his *Iliad*: 'Blonde Demeter separates fruit and chaff in the rushing of the winds'. Demeter's daughter by Zeus is Persephone or Kore; they were known as Ceres and Proserpine to the Romans. There is the legend, placed either in Eleusis in Greece or by Lake Pergusa near Enna in Sicily, that Persephone and her companions were gathering flowers in a meadow when the earth opened and Hades, the god of the underworld, charged out in his chariot and seized Persephone. The Sicilian version says that he re-entered the earth with his captive at the Fonte Ciane near Syracuse: there are records that there were drowning sacrifices at that site in ancient times, which may be linked to the myth. Demeter, after lighting a pine tree in the crater of Etna to use as a torch, wandered the earth desolate, eventually finding her daughter, but Persephone had eaten six seeds of a pomegranate Hades had offered her and had married her kidnapper. Zeus decided that Persephone should spend six months of the year with her husband (who was also Zeus' brother), and six with her mother. While Persephone is underground, Demeter is in despair and nothing can germinate or grow, her tears are the rainfall; but when she returns, everything is blissfully fragrant and colourful with flowers. This myth, of the cycle of death and rebirth, is an ancient one with echoes in many different cultures. As Sicily was an oasis of fertility compared with the home cities of the Greek colonists, it is not surprising that the legends surrounding Demeter should become so well rooted here.

C.F.



Gold coin with the head of Persephone.

On a hill above the lake excavations (*not open to the public*) were begun in 1878 of the necropolis, city and walls of **Cozzo Matrice**, a Bronze-Age settlement. About 10km southwest of the lake in Località Gerace, a Roman villa with polychrome mosaics was discovered in 1994, but the excavations have since been covered over.

A short way southeast of Pergusa is the neat and tidy farming town of **Valguarnera Caropepe** (*map p. 569, B2*; the second part of the name, meaning 'expensive pepper', is now usually dropped). It was founded by the Valguarnera family in 1628 and reached prosperity thanks to its sulphur mines. In the countryside east of Valguarnera are the isolated ruins of the medieval **castle of Gresti** (*map p. 569, B2–B3*), on an enormous rock split in two—a very rough track for the last part of the way, but incredibly beautiful at sunset.

## PIAZZA ARMERINA

The town of Piazza Armerina (*map p. 569, B3*) has a medieval character, with dark cobbled streets and interesting Baroque monuments. The inhabitants are of Lombard origin; many of them have blue eyes and blond hair and they have their own dialect.

The town is divided into four districts: Monte (on the highest point of Monte Mira, where the new town was built in 1163); Castellina (the district around the church of San Francesco d'Assisi, so-called because of a small castle which once protected it); Canali (once the Jewish Ghetto; the church of Santa Lucia was the synagogue); and Casalotto (a separate village, which was incorporated into the city only in the 16th century). Though it was once far more important and more populous than Enna (which was named capital of the province by Mussolini), it was little known to travellers before the discovery of the Roman villa nearby at Casale (*see p. 277*).

### HISTORY OF PIAZZA ARMERINA

The original Sikel settlement was probably near Casale, where a luxurious Roman villa would later be built. It is a well-watered, fertile area which was conquered by the Arabs in 861 and named *Iblatasah*. The name may derive from *palatia*, a reference to the imperial villa, whose imposing ruins were visible for many centuries after its abandonment. In 1091 Count Roger gave it to his Lombard troops, who had taken it after a ferocious battle; the Lombards called their new home *Platia* or *Plutia*. The town grew, entirely covering the ruins of the Roman villa. Less than a century later, in 1161, William I (the Bad) discovered that Ruggero Sclavo of Plutia was one of the ring-leaders in a plot against him; he sent his Muslim troops to destroy the city and scatter the inhabitants (barely a hundred survived). When his son William II (the Good) came to power in 1163, the Lombards begged him to allow reconstruction; he replied that he could not disobey his father's edict, but they could build a new town 3km away, on Monte Mira (now the Monte quarter); it was called Piazza Armoria, now Piazza Armerina. The abandoned ruins of Plutia, further devastated by landslides and earthquakes, became a farming hamlet called Casale. After the Sicilian Vespers (*see p. 75*), Piazza Armerina was vocal in demanding independence for the island, and at a meeting of the Sicilian Parliament convened here in December 1295, Frederick II of Aragon was declared king. The townspeople stoutly resisted the attempts of Robert of Anjou to reclaim the island for his family. In recognition of this loyalty, King Frederick granted the town many privileges, which are listed in a manuscript, *Il Libro dei Privilegi*, still in the civic library.

### THE UPPER TOWN

A number of streets converge on the central **Piazza Garibaldi**, a favourite meeting-place. Here is the 18th-century Palazzo di Città (Town Hall) next to the church of the Fundrò (or San Rocco), with a carved sandstone doorway. Between them Via Cavour

sarcophagus) Peter II (d. 1342), King of Sicily. The smooth porphyry sarcophagi are almost certainly Imperial Roman in workmanship, because the Egyptian quarries of this type of stone were already exhausted in the Middle Ages. It is not known how they found their way to Palermo.

### STUPOR MUNDI

'The wonder of the world' is what his contemporaries called Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, for his many skills, ranging from languages (he could speak six), mathematics, astronomy, astrology, music, literature (he was the founder of the 'Sicilian School' which flourished at his court in Palermo), the building of castles, hunting (his fundamental text on falconry, *De arti venandi cum avibus*, is in the Vatican Library), to the fine arts of diplomacy. He was born quite by chance in Jesi, in the Marche, on 26th December 1194, because his mother, Constance de Hauteville, was travelling from Milan to Sicily to join her husband. She chose to give birth in the main square, under a canopy, so that the matrons of Jesi could witness the fact that the baby was really hers; gossip and speculation were rife; there was even a prophecy that the Antichrist was about to be born. Nine years earlier, Constance, as the last Norman princess of Sicily, had been brought out of a cloistered convent in Palermo in order to marry the unpleasant, dissolute Henry VI of Swabia, eleven years her junior. Now she was 40, and this was her first child. Henry and Constance died soon after, so Frederick was brought up in Palermo, running free through the streets of the city, undoubtedly acquiring many of those accomplishments which would later stand him in good stead. Last of the medieval monarchs, first of the modern rulers, Frederick spent all his life trying to unite the Holy Roman Empire to the rich Kingdom of Sicily: unfortunately for him, the Papal States stood—both literally and metaphorically—between him and success. He remains a colourful and fascinating figure in the history of Europe, defiant of the pope, even excommunicated, yet leader of the most successful and least bloody Crusade; the founder of modern diplomacy; and the first to draw up laws defending the rights of women and for the protection of wildlife.

### Nave and south side

In the nave are **statues of saints** from a high reredos (25m) by Antonello Gagini and his family, who worked on it for over 64 years. Known as the Tribuna, this masterpiece was dismantled arbitrarily in the 18th century. Now models of the work, and some fragments of it, are on view in the Diocesan Museum. The canopied **stoup (7)** is attributed to Domenico Gagini. The other **stoup (8)**, damaged but of fine workmanship, is by his school.

In the fourth south chapel is an **altarpiece by Pietro Novelli (9)**; notice also, in the sixth chapel **(10)** **reliquary urns of saints of Palermo** and, used as an altar frontal, the tomb slab of St Cosmas, a Sicilian bishop martyred in 1160; the seventh chapel **(11)** has a fine marble inlaid altar (1713).

The **meridian line** on the floor **(12)**, 22m long, was made by Father Giuseppe Piazzi, priest, mathematician and astronomer, in 1801. The light coming through the tiny hole in the dome on the right at midday, indicates the zodiac sign for the time of year.

In the south transept **(13)** there is an altarpiece by Giuseppe Velasco and, above the altar, a bas-relief of the *Dormition of the Virgin* by Antonello Gagini (1535).

In the **Chapel of St Rosalia (14)** is a 17th-century silver coffer containing the relics of the saint (*see p. 73*); the reliefs on the walls are 19th-century.

### The choir and north side

The east end of the **choir (15)** has a *Resurrection of Christ* on the altar, high reliefs, and (in niches), statues of the Apostles, all fragments of Antonello Gagini's reredos. The choir stalls date from 1466.

The chapel left of the choir **(16)** houses a large domed ciborium in lapis lazuli (1663) and the funerary monument of Bishop Sanseverino (1793).

In the north transept **(17)**, at the foot of an early 14th-century wooden Crucifix

