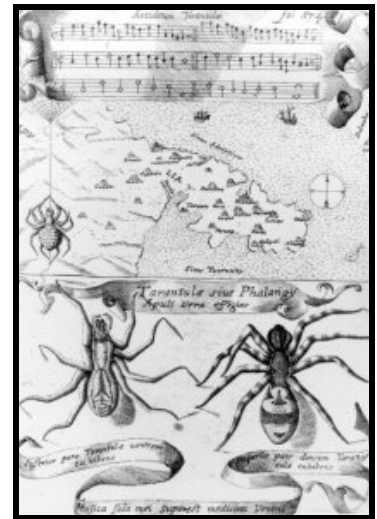


How did Tarantulas get their name?

The word "tarantula" has a storied history and one in which myth is hard to separate from fact. To fully understand how tarantulas got their common name you have to go back over 600 years to the small town of Taranto on the southern coast of Italy. In this region of southern Europe occurs a large spider, the European wolf spider specifically, unrelated to what we now call tarantulas. This spider was named after the town of Taranto and was called a "tarantola" and could often be found living in burrows in agricultural fields. People living in this region thought that the bite of the spider caused a disease called "tarantismo." This affliction was marked by a period of melancholy and then death. It was believed that the only way to avoid death was a frenzied, uncontrollable dance, set to music, called the "tarantella."

Over time the music associated with the dancing became stylized. One of the more well known pieces called "Antidotum Tarantulae", roughly translated as "treatment for spider bite", was even incorporated into the ballet, Swan Lake by Tchaikovsky. Although once simply considered a cure for tarantula bite, some experts now assert that tarantismo was actually a complex socio-religious reaction to the extremely repressive conditions that existed in Europe at the time.

Regardless of the ultimate origin of tarantismo, the question that still needs to be addressed is how did large, hairy spiders, unrelated to the tarantola of Italy, get to be called tarantulas? Well, the answer to that lies in the exploration and settlement of places, like Mexico and the American southwest, where the spiders we now call tarantulas occur. Explorers and settlers of these regions included a large contingent from southern Spain and Italy. As homesteads and farms were established, settlers likely encountered these very large, hairy spiders. It is thought that they simply called them by the name that was most often applied to the large spiders of their homelands, the tarantola. Today, the word tarantula is synonymous with the big, formidable spiders we are familiar with in our country.



Antidotum Tarantulae (17th Cen-