DEATH CONTROL IN THE WEST 1500–1800
SEX RATIOS AT BAPTISM IN ITALY, FRANCE AND ENGLAND
GREGORY HANLON
Employing a rigorous methodological approach and analysing a vast body of sources from towns and regions in Italy, France and England over 300 years, this book hints at the extent of “routine” infanticide of newborns by married parents in early modern Europe, a practice ignored by contemporary tribunals.

Death Control in the West 1500–1800 examines baptismal registers and ecclesiastical censuses across a score of communities in Catholic and Protestant Europe. Married women had little reason to hide their condition from priests, midwives, neighbours and friends; however, the practice of post-partum abortion was common everywhere, especially during times of hardship. By no means was it confined to the lower classes or to girls alone. Proposing a series of reflections on population control, this volume explores how families adopted a system of selective infanticide to manage resources and to safeguard social status, just like populations elsewhere around the globe.

This study is an excellent tool for students and researchers interested in the demographic mechanisms of the age and social and familial relationships in early modern Europe.

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DEATH CONTROL IN THE WEST 1500–1800

Sex Ratios at Baptism in Italy, France and England

Gregory Hanlon et al.
To Prof. Jean-Pierre Poussou, eminent demographer, *grand-père* of this project
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In almost two decades of researching this book, I have been assisted – and not infrequently challenged – by scholars the world over. Jean-Pierre Pousou's undergraduate classes at Bordeaux a half-century ago provided me with the basic training in demographic methods upon which this project rests. Parisian colleagues have offered unstinting support from the outset, notably Pousou's successors in demographic and family history at the Sorbonne, Vincent Gourdon and François-Joseph Ruggiu, but in equal measure Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes des Sciences Sociales. Other French colleagues whose support and insight proved invaluable have been Jean-Pierre Bardet, Eric Brian, the biologist Michel Garenne at the Institut Pasteur, Stéphane Capot, director of the Archives Départementales du Lot-et-Garonne and above all Serge Brunet in Montpellier. Even after four decades teaching in Canada, I still self-identify as a French historian out of the Annales tradition. The passage of time and the unfurling of new fashions in history only underscore how much the empirical French training has turned out to be a lifelong advantage.

The late archivist Giuseppe Chironi talked the aged custodian of the diocesan archive of Pienza, Don Aldo Franci, into giving me access to its precious collections, almost complete for the seventeenth century. It was the site of the first discoveries. Italian colleagues have also been helpful and encouraging guides, in particular Elena Taddia in Paris and Mario Rizzo in Pavia. Retired historians Marzio Acchille Romani and Roberto Lasagni sent me their books and data, long out of print and difficult to obtain, while Luca Mocarelli and Diego Pedrini passed on pertinent works.

British and American colleagues Gill Newton, Richard Hoyle, Quentin Outram, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, Jennifer Kosmin and Fabian Drixler lent their ears and their sympathy at various stages of the project, while Tim Stretton in Halifax passed on titles to read and to ponder. Especially deserving of my gratitude are my
Dalhousie University colleague Christophe Herbinger and the six former students who patiently deciphered thousands of baptismal records in the preparation of their theses; Cristel Hug, Laura Hynes-Jenkins, Robin Greene Cann, Dominic Rossi, Ciara Quigley and Evan Johnson. I hope that their exposure to whatever criticism may arise from their labour will prove to be another learning experience.
INTRODUCTION

Grim reckonings from European archives

Family size limitation: a human behavioural universal

Thirty years ago, anthropologists Marvin Harris and Eric B. Ross reviewed the literature on population regulation in pre-industrial societies and made some sweeping and surprising generalisations on behaviour in the West. Neither the peasantry nor the upper classes in Europe were raising as many babies as they were biologically capable of doing, because, whether or not they fully realised it, they were weighing the costs relative to their social rank and their own and their infants’ life prospects. Demographers and historians had always explained the low number of births as being the result of various kinds of birth control, assumed to be a cultural invention of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Harris and Ross speculated that parents must have been winnowing the offspring born to them by some form of “death control” that escaped the attention of demographers.1 They noted gradations in maternal behaviour towards newborns that condemned some of these to death in the shorter or medium term. The socially sanctioned direct killing of an unwanted infant usually takes place before the victim achieves the status of being fully human. “Birth” is defined socially at a date later than parturition, typically with a set of rituals that welcome the newborn into its family and community. Infanticide of a neonate committed before the social status of the infant became official would have been a common occurrence, Hariss and Ross conjectured. In addition to quick neonatal killing, indirect infanticide begins with inadequate feeding, premature weaning and careless and indifferent mothering.

In advance of their time, these sociologists compared human behaviour with that of other species, including primates, known to cull their young. It has long been known that male primates will kill the progeny of other males and take a special interest in the young where there is a presumption of biological paternity. Evolutionary psychologists were among the first to see the reproductive interest
in neonatal infanticide, building upon a pioneering article by Robert Trivers and Dan Willard, studying an array of mammals to determine how mothers invest more in one sex than another. Adjusting the sex ratio at birth enables the mother to raise a larger number of offspring to adulthood. “One might expect biases in parental behavior towards offspring of different sex according to parental condition, with parents in better condition expected to show a bias towards male offspring.”

Human infanticide differs from that of other primates in that it is typically carried out by the mother, with tacit agreement from other members of the group. Mothers act to avoid having too many offspring, or too many of one sex, or at intervals too short to ensure the survival of toddlers. The consequences of having a child or not are much greater among humans, given the long period of infant dependency. Harris and Ross concluded that culturally mediated abortion and infanticide must have been important aspects of human demography, and that fertility rates were very elastic before 1900. An unresolved issue was whether this infanticide was strongly sex specific, aimed at preventing future population growth by limiting the number of females. In China, India and Japan there is much evidence that females were disproportionately targeted. Harris and Ross assumed that similar behaviour would have prevailed in pre-industrial Europe as in Asia, for “a reluctance to face up to the existence of systemic death control as an optimizing strategy in pre-industrial modes of production, distorts our perception of the classic demographic transition.”

There is cause to believe, they claim, that unregistered female infanticide would influence the figures of both natality and mortality. This conclusion, admittedly advanced on the basis of little evidence, was not something Western demographers wished to admit.

Their unsubstantiated claim was hardly absurd. Such behaviour is so widespread in the anthropological literature that it likely constitutes a human universal found throughout time. Examining the available literature on 350 pre-industrial societies in the 1950s, George Devereux concluded that induced abortion was likely a universal phenomenon, but the least dangerous methods rarely worked and infanticide served as an effective backup technology. This first anthropological study found anti-natalist practice almost everywhere, both as a specific goal and as an “accidentally on-purpose” behaviour the practice of which remained unspoken. A generation later, Martin Daly and Margo Wilson stressed that motivational mechanisms must be scrutinised in the light of selection theory, whereby mothers and fathers (who pondered the probability of their paternity) assessed the life prospects of each newborn. Offspring do not have equal reproductive value to the parent, and given the choice between the newborn and the toddler, no group disposes of the toddler. Mothers certainly assess the quality of their offspring and their vivacity before deciding to invest in them. Divestment from lost causes should be a “natural” inclination. Mothers may also choose to keep only one of a set of twins, whose lower birth weight renders them more vulnerable.

More recent studies identify abortion and deliberate infanticide as universal practices in human societies, part of a species repertory that would also include adultery, divorce, murder and war, but also nepotism, charity and instruction. Nowhere
is abortion or infanticide celebrated, nor does it have an explicitly central place in any culture. Overt disapproval of the practice does not prevent a widespread tolerance of it if women practise it in the shadows. Since the most common reaction is to close one’s eyes to its incidence, it becomes difficult to study. Any behaviour that is universal in the species probably has good reasons for existing. In evolutionary thinking, animals are understood to maximise their individual reproductive fitness. Maternal care is genetically as selfish as any other kind of co-operation. Selection produces individuals who are capable of strategic responses, or what is termed “plasticity” of behaviour. Infanticide may or may not occur, depending on the sociological circumstances.

Let’s summarise the human ethology and anthropology of this kind of infanticide before proceeding to the history of Western countries. It is a practice of mothers, first and foremost, who are sometimes aided by midwives, either of whom kills the newborn shortly after birth. The earliest studies examined the anthropological literature compiled and centralised in Human Relations Area Files, where it figured in over half of the sampled societies, but there was general admission that it was probably under-reported given that anthropologists enjoyed unequal access to men and women in the groups under their microscope. Humans everywhere have actively limited their population given that unrealised fertility was a necessary safety mechanism enabling rapid growth under better circumstances. Infants were killed because there were too many of them, or because they were born too close together, showed some physical malformity or were not of the right sex. Nomadic hunters were able to reproduce about once every four years, which suggests that infanticide among those groups must have been frequent. Agricultural societies might double this rate whenever there was room for expansion. Culling would have occurred before any ceremony marked the newborn’s admission to the group.

There are other features widespread in the anthropological literature. One would be the vulnerability of children from a previous marriage once the mother remarried. Paternal investment in offspring is facultative; fathers take no part in lactation, and in most populations take little part in direct care of infants. Withdrawing biological and emotional support for a newborn was a mother’s choice and prerogative, since it was her choice to keep a child alive. Twins may be particularly susceptible to “weeding,” the removal of one of the pair at birth in order to enhance the chances of survival of the other. In any case, few of these actions are written down or closely studied. The most careful analysis of these phenomena is by Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, whose monumental book Mother Nature underlines how much the existence of maternal instincts in humans and other animals conditions everything. Mothers in the real world have always made trade-offs between subsistence and reproduction. There seems to be a biologically programmed period when emotional attachment takes place. Mothers learn to recognise their infant in the days after birth, but do not fall in love with them right away. It is lactation that triggers the psychological and physiological mechanisms of attachment. “Humans, like other animals, use flexible rules to bias investment towards sons in some cases, towards daughters in others. They evaluate contingencies like birth order, offspring quality, available assistance,
inheritance prospects. There is nothing innate, however, in a preference of one sex over another." Blaffer Hrdy assumes that infanticide must have been common everywhere and could often have been disguised as “overlaying.” Daly and Wilson emphasise how the youngest mothers were the most likely to be infanticidal. In most cases, infanticide was a crime leaving no aggrieved party seeking revenge if it was committed right away. It could be overlooked and forgotten with the passage of time. A survey of infanticide literature stresses that mothers who kill newborns are not depressed or psychotic – unlike mothers who kill their older children. The premeditated act is still more common than we think. There is a general reluctance to view women as murderers, and the courts still prefer to turn a blind eye or invoke mitigating circumstances when they encounter it.

Given the opprobrium that surrounds the act, few anthropologists are called to witness the deed. Most research documenting the practice places emphasis on sex ratios, on the understanding that in humans the rate of males over females among live births stands universally around 105 males for every 100 females. The male bias in the ratio reflects the greater mortality of young males, but this evens out around the age of reproduction. Deviations away from the average sex ratio at birth tended to be small and fleeting until more recent times when parents could finally determine the sex of the child well in advance of its birth. In historical societies, the problem with the available sex ratios is one of accurate registration. Where birth records are complete, the number of boys to every 100 girls falls between 102 and 107, which we will fix at 105 for ease of analysis. Skewed ratios of masculinity in countries with inefficient population registries should not lead us to conclude that the sex ratio varies with climate or race. As demographer Louis Henri noted, in the hospitals of Hanoi (between 1944 and 1946), with rigorous surveillance, the sex ratio was the usual 105; in the native maternity wards the ratio rose above 110, and in the city beyond the hospital it soared to between 160 and 180. Elsewhere in Indochina it was even higher.

**European contours before 1900**

How singular was European infanticide before 1900 compared to the anthropological model sketched above? Historians in the West have relied almost exclusively on records of criminal trials in which unwed mothers or married women carrying progeny not sired by their husbands hid their pregnancies and killed their newborns alone or with female accomplices. Tribunals operated against single mothers almost exclusively, but only if they killed the newborn deliberately. Simple abandonment was not a comparable offense. In the jurisdiction of the Parlement of Paris at the height of the repression in France in the late sixteenth century, judges confirmed capital sentences on about ten mothers annually, in a vast territory numbering eight million people. This harshness was a new development, and it would not endure. Unmarried women were subject to considerable surveillance by their female neighbours especially, who were only too happy to relate their suspicions to magistrates. But infanticide prosecutions under severe laws
were a new development, trying to stem the tide of medieval indifference. Using judicial sources, Harrington calculates that over the sixteenth century, the number of Nuremberg women executed for infanticide multiplied by 12, but this would have struck only a tiny fraction of people guilty of the deed. Cadavers of infants recovered by the authorities represented only 0.02 percent of the annual number of births. And there was no punishment for merely abandoning children.\textsuperscript{21} Infanticide of newborns by their unwed mothers constitutes a fraction of other homicides committed, overwhelmingly by men of other males.

In Italy the Church pressured unwed mothers to deliver their newborns to one of about 1,200 foundling hospitals, which were regarded as important manifestations of Christian piety. The foundling-home system was primarily concerned with reintegrating unwed mothers into society, and the institutions would pay for the nursing of these infants in order to avoid their killing by mothers who considered them to be an embarrassment and an impediment to marriage. Some of these hospitals, from the eighteenth century onward, accepted the offspring of legitimate couples too, who hoped to reclaim their infants in better times. The clergy feared that married mothers might otherwise smother the newborns in their sleep. Child abandonment by married parents was by no means limited to indigent parents, but expressed rather the lack of a strong parental bond with the newcomer.\textsuperscript{22}

Neonaticide was occasionally perceived to be a common practice whereby married women could kill unwanted infants with impunity. This would have continued a behaviour reaching as far back as Antiquity which Christianity never really challenged.\textsuperscript{23} Medieval historians rely on ambiguous archaeological evidence to explain the imbalance between male and female adult skeletons.\textsuperscript{24} Early modern historians of childbirth have always admitted that mothers could have committed both active and passive neonaticide. Sometimes suffocation of newborns would have been accidental or (the term recurs frequently) semi-voluntary. Mothers were reluctant to let their infants sleep in cradles, as the clergy recommended, preferring to keep them in their beds. Sometimes infant death was an assassination shrouded in a silent consensus.\textsuperscript{25} Joel Harrington writes that “passive and active infanticide were by no means limited to single mothers and illegitimate newborns, and that both practices were not unheard-of in the general population,” but he provides no source to sustain the claim. Centuries later in Aragon, Maria Tausiet considers that the lives of newborns were valued with the same ambiguity as the fetus is today. It was a “well-established custom” for mothers to kill unwanted newborns, harsher legislation notwithstanding. The archbishop of Tarragona, on visit to the district of Villabella in 1737, lamented that infants were suffocated in their parents’ beds before they received the baptismal sacrament. Others were killed through simple neglect, premature weaning leading to death due to starvation, dehydration or lack of attention.\textsuperscript{26}

The evidence for routine infanticide by married mothers in the literature mentioned above is largely anecdotal. It bears little resemblance to conclusions drawn from a mass of population and sex-ratio data marshalled by Asian historians.
Katherine Lynch emphasises this contrast in a recent article that concludes that Europeans were different from Asians: claiming that they established foundling hospitals mainly to prevent infanticide, and that there is little evidence that parents selected certain infants for abandonment as part of a strategic process to maintain a desired sex ratio. “We should not be surprised by its nearly-entire absence from historical demographic studies.”

But not so fast! Sex-ratio studies in Europe are only now being conducted by demographers. There exists some quantitative research drawing attention to this very phenomenon from the end of the Middle Ages that has not yet arrived at a synthesis. Sex-ratio studies of the kind applied to Asian populations seem to be the answer to the question as to whether Europeans held their natalist ideologies strongly enough to preclude widespread infant killing. Anthropologists have sometimes mused that the biological sex ratio is an illusion, but as we have seen above, wherever accurate registration occurs the level stabilises at about 105 males for every 100 females, or a male proportion of 51.22 percent. Eric Brian and Marie Jaisson have submitted modern French statistics to a serried analysis that shows that while the proportion is not constant, it is subject only to mild wobbling; 51.4 percent in 1845, 51.1 percent in 1900, 51.5 percent in 1918 and 51.3 percent after the Second World War. Historian Gérard Delille warns us that we will need considerable numbers, at least ten or twenty thousand individuals, to distinguish between statistically significant phenomena and normal random variation. In his South Italian prospections in the diocese of Sant’Agata he suspects that one cannot exclude the possibility of sex-selective infanticide, but that it could only have been the survival of a barbarous practice not yet eradicated by Counter-Reformation preaching.

The first conventional sex-ratio-at-baptism study for an early modern population appears to be that of a primary-school mathematics teacher, Glynis Reynolds, who examined eight parishes in the Fens district of Cambridgeshire from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century. She tabulated Church of England baptisms by calendar year and did not separate the elite parishioners from the commoners. A cumulative tally for all eight parishes (slightly more than four thousand baptisms) gives a sex ratio of 98 for 1559–99, 114 for 1600–49, 113 for 1650–99, 110 for 1700–49, 124 for 1750–99) and finally 94 for 1800–12. “The pattern evident in Willingham and the surrounding parishes is one that might be expected if infanticide were prevalent because female babies were in disfavour,” she concludes. Reynolds was not a university demographer and her study was completely ignored in the literature.

**Sex-ratio studies from baptismal registers**

Anthropologists have learned that in many societies, birth alone does not entitle the newcomer to recognition by the mother and her entourage. Usually there is a formal ceremony, often with the conferral of a name, that makes the birth official. Christian baptism is one such inclusion ritual. Baptism was the first and most important act recorded by priests, becoming a requirement for both Catholic and
Protestant clergy around the time of the Reformation. Baptism was the prerequisite Christian sacrament, which, like similar welcoming rituals in many other societies, conferred on an infant a name, official recognition of filiation and a set of symbolic kin whose officious duty was to advance the welfare of the child. The sacrament is more complex than it would first appear. Catholic theology held that only baptised infants could accede to heaven, but it admitted that an urgent, abbreviated form of the ritual in the absence of the priest would have the same effect. This was sometimes designated as baptism by water, and was conferrable by anybody. If an infant risked dying soon after birth, the midwife or a family member was authorised to proceed with the baptism by water, or *ondoïement*. Applying water to the head of the infant (or sometimes any other part), the officiant pronounced, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost,” and made the sign of the cross three times over the infant. This rite was sufficient for salvation, but not for parish life; the infant would still have to be carried to the priest, who might apply a conditional baptism if he were unsure of the sacramental correctness of the ondoïement. For newborns who showed no signs of life, he would add to the quick ceremony the phrase “if you are alive.” He blessed the infant with ointment and recorded the ceremony in the register in the presence of the godparents, who became the spiritual kin of the newborn.

An infant who died without receiving the emergency ondoïement or official baptism had no formal existence and could neither be baptised nor buried in consecrated ground. There would usually be no trace of the unbaptised newborn in the burial register. There was no obligation in canon law to record the existence of stillborn infants either, who could not be interred in consecrated ground. The presentation of infant cadavers to authorities – if indeed they ever were presented – would not raise too many suspicions if the frequency of these was high. Parents might deliver the little cadaver to a foundling hospital, as in Genoa, where they numbered more than two hundred annually in the nineteenth century. Sometimes conscientious clergymen would consign their existence to the register, but there is no reason to think this was systematic. Stillbirths were not officially recorded in England and Wales until 1927, when they were estimated at 4 percent of all births. Nicky Hart speculates that their incidence rate must have been a coefficient of 1.8 of the level of neonatal death, giving a projected stillbirth rate of almost 11 percent in 1590 and 15 percent in the dire 1690s. A remarkable master’s thesis by Marie-Diane Dansette stipulates the conditions of neonatal registration in rural nineteenth-century France, not far from Paris. A royal act of 1736 insisted that stillborn and dead infants under the age of one should be recorded, but for a long time after the register recorded only baptised infants. After the revolution, official population records were kept by the commune, not the parish. The recorded rate of stillbirths, accounting for around 2 percent of births, was too low to be realistic. There was considerable negligence on the part of parents declaring dead babies; even when they did, they mostly only declared boys. Municipal officials had no inclination to verify the parents’ stories, and medical doctors were never involved. In the French nineteenth century, which widely practised contraception,
what Dansette euphemistically calls “la mortinatalié provoquée” functioned as a backup technology in the event of an unwanted pregnancy. Dansette has looked more closely at the (mostly peasant) parents of the 258 infants declared stillborn to local authorities over the nineteenth century and concludes that only three couples were clearly indigent. Families wished to be better off, and practised contraception and infanticide to achieve that end. The stillborn infants were often the last children they would have. Only in 1867 did authorities seek to verify the cause of infant deaths. Until then, neonaticides made up a good proportion of infants claimed as stillbirths, a fact which appeared to be inevitable, and authorities were generally indifferent to it. Clergy often neglected to mention the burial of even baptised infants; Perrenoud assessed these as accounting for 3 percent of small children in Calvinist early modern Geneva, but the proportion would have varied with each scribe.

In aristocratic circles, especially in France, godparents, like marriage partners, were chosen from far afield, and it would have required time to organise travel. Parents bestowed the ondoiement immediately and then waited for a better occasion – often years later – to carry out the baptismal ceremony. Priests might ratify the ondoiement of several siblings simultaneously, some of whom might be teenagers by that time. Delayed elite baptisms became so fashionable in mid-seventeenth-century Aquitaine that in February 1661 the bishop of Agen had had enough and commanded parents to present their offspring in church for the official ceremony. Tardy baptism figured much more rarely thereafter.

Public baptism was a festive occasion, with the register signed not only by the officiating priest but often by well-wishers who were present at the ceremony too – typically a dozen in Marmande. This flourish of signatures was a concession by the priest, happy to oblige the happy parents, who would celebrate the event at home after the ceremony. Baptismal records fulfilled multiple purposes beyond the official inclusion of a newcomer in the community, however: Priests could determine the age of each child to organise first communion and confirmation, which usually occurred with the onset of adolescence. Baptismal register extracts were required in order to confirm eligibility for admission to elite employment or to clerical status. Most importantly, they served to establish eligibility for marriage; every time a couple applied to the Church for permission to marry, the priest carried out a quick inquest to determine that the bride and groom were not kin within the canonical fourth degree. Males and females were equally important in this equation. Protestants also baptised their infants, one of only two sacraments for Calvinists. Protestant baptismal registers are better kept than those of burials, but the notables might wait weeks or months to hold the ceremony.

Skeptics persuaded of the overriding importance of ideology might counter that, given the widespread misogyny of the era, clergymen were less punctilious in recording female infants or even conferring baptism on them. But as we will see,
FIGURE 0.1 Giuseppe Crespi, sc. Anton Riedel (1754) Catholic church baptism: Godparents present an infant for baptism, with witnesses in the background. The ceremony was virtually universal for all Christian children whose parents intended to keep them. © Art World/Alamy Stock Photo
some parishes registered a persistent disproportion in favour of girls over boys. In the early modern period, when Catholic clergy numbered perhaps one adult in fifty, it is difficult to imagine that an infant could long remain unbaptised, especially in towns of modest size and villages. Married women were visibly pregnant for months and had no reason to hide their condition. They performed their chores in the company of inquisitive neighbours who wanted to know in advance the choice of name and the identity of the godparents. These last would have to be enlisted in advance, as would the midwife designated for the birthing. No woman could help but be on familiar terms with any one of the local priests, the curate or his subordinate vicars, deacons, acolytes and minor clerics, canons of a collegiate church, monks and friars who came to their door to request alms. The richer inhabitants, who preferred an initial ondoiement, were the same families who produced priests and nuns. Protestant Calvinists in France designated neighborhood elders of the consistory whose task it was to know everyone’s business. Lack of baptism becomes conceivable only in the nineteenth century, after decades of de-Christianisation (in France) and the rural exodus to cities (in England and France) overwhelmed the administrative infrastructure.\textsuperscript{39} In Britain there was no compulsory registry of live birth (note the distinction) until 1874, and the estimation for London was that 15 to 25 percent of births in some parts of the city were not registered.\textsuperscript{40}

This book will study sex ratios at baptism in a systematic manner from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century in Italy, France and England respectively. The project began with a serendipitous discovery of periodic discrepancies in the sex ratio at baptism. While examining the baptismal records for the Tuscan village of Montefollonico, curious to measure the impact of the great famine of the late 1640s, it appeared to me that there were too many boys being baptised relative to girls, far in excess of the biological sex ratio of 105. This activated memories of my first encounter with demographic history, in Bordeaux, under the aegis of one of its leading practitioners, Jean-Pierre Poussou. Some phenomena are best not tallied by calendar year, he explained to a crowded amphitheatre. A harvest year, starting on 1 July and extending to 30 June, might be better suited to measuring the effects of famine on an agricultural economy. It seemed opportune to distinguish the baptism of boys from that of girls. A few years later it also seemed obvious that one might separate – disaggregate, in demographic jargon – the well-to-do parents, identified by honorific prefixes like “Maestro” or “Signore,” from the others, because famines did not have the same urgency for them. The situation of bastards would be different also. True rates of illegitimacy for single localities are not easily established; a mother or her emissary, too ashamed to bring the newborn to her parish baptismal font in Montefollonico, might carry the child to a nearby locality, or to the small foundling hospital in Montepulciano, three hours distant. This detail works both ways, however, for anonymous infants from nearby parishes could be baptised in Montefollonico. One can distinguish anonymous abandoned infants from those of mothers whose predicament was well known and publicised by her neighbours, and again from those whose father confessed paternity in the register (this was rare
in Italy and France). From the point of view of the illegitimate newborn, these were all different situations that weighed on their survival chances. Another important detail was to indicate the baptism of twins so as to identify their overall frequency, whether of two boys, two girls or one of each. The frequency of multiple births among commoners could be compared to those of the upper classes and even to the frequency of bastards.  

A baptismal template easily permits one to collect all this data, not just from one harvest year to another, but monthly. An example is appended here:

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**FIGURE 0.2** Sample of a datasheet, with its categories and miscellaneous information
The baptismal-register tallies could then be set against the surviving status animarum records for the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Italy, when they become very frequent. These remarkable ecclesiastical censuses were compiled at the end of each winter, specifying the place of residence of each family, the names and ages of each member of the household (including servants) and indicating whether or not each had given confession and taken communion that year. In these documents, compiled by the parish priest, there was no apparent heaping of ages, even among adults. This listing by place of residence revealed another important detail: that village dwellers had far more girls than sharecropping parents, who preferred boys. The combination of parish records with marriage contracts and the surviving testaments enables one to study the anthropology of reproduction with some finesse. This initial research was presented at the Sorbonne’s Institut Mousnier in 2002, in the well-attended seminar of Poussou and Yves-Marie Bercé. The response was one of guarded approval; the subject was judged interesting and worthy of further research in larger localities. Almost two decades later, through my efforts and those of talented honours and masters students, the contours of European sex-selective infanticide appear even more complex and intriguing.

Despite their richness, the interpretation of early modern registers conforming to the guidelines of the Council of Trent is fraught with a number of imponderables, especially with respect to the designation of social elites. We include all those whose father or mother were designated by an honorific title or prefix (Maestro, Signore, Sieur, Demoiselle, Messire, Mr or Esquire) without separating nobles from other notables. Not inscribing the parents’ honorific prefix in the register would have constituted a slight, exposing the priest to reprisal. But in addition to people whose legal status entitled them to public deference there were many others with reserves of food and social capital enough to shield them from famine: those in the food trades, for example, the millers, bakers, butchers and innkeepers. Other notables would include merchants and boat-masters, luxury artisans and members of those professions that required education or highly specialised apprenticeships, such as jewelers, surgeons and schoolmasters. In urban parishes such people could be very numerous, but the priests were not obligated to take the trouble to indicate their higher standing in the register. Separating the elites from the commoners is a sensible distinction, but the percentage of elite parents varies from one scribe to another.

Given the propensity of elites to delay church baptism in favour of discreet ondoiement, we should tabulate baptisms by date of birth rather than date of baptism, although priests did not always distinguish between the two. Historians once assumed that baptism would have closely followed birth in order to ensure the infant’s salvation. Contrary to what was often assumed by the first historical demographers, Catholic baptisms were not always performed in the 48 hours following birth, and parents might wait until the first convenient day – often a Sunday – to take the infant to church. Catholic theology speculated that the souls of unbaptised infants languished in limbo, which every parent should wish to avoid. Church regulations emphasised that the ceremony should be carried out within 48 hours of birth. Many historians make a presumption of fervent belief that was