

New book suggests historical infanticide in Europe was likely more widespread than estimated

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"Routine" infanticide of newborns by married parents in early modern Europe was a much more widespread practice than previously thought, a new book posits.

This fresh insight sits at the heart of a new book, "Death Control in the West 1500–1800: Sex Ratios at Baptism in Italy, France and England," by Gregory Hanlon and contributors.

The French-trained behavioral historian says, "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."

Widespread infanticide

Hanlon, who is Distinguished Research Professor at Dalhousie University in Canada, calls attention to the limited scope of existing scholarship, which has never focused on sex ratios of infants brought for baptism within hours or days after their birth.

These records reveal startling spikes in the number of male baptisms in the aftermath of famines or diseases.

He notes, "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. Married infanticidal mothers may have been a hundred times more numerous."

Hanlon's research suggests that in rural Tuscany at the height of infanticide the victims might have constituted up to a third of the total number of live births.

Beyond the lone woman perpetrator

Using baptismal registers and ecclesiastical censuses drawn from scores

of parishes in Italy, France and England, Hanlon shows similar infanticide patterns across city and country, for Catholics, Calvinists and Anglicans alike.

In Italy's rural 17th century Tuscany, Hanlon suggests that parents seemed willing to sacrifice a child if they were a twin, opting to keep just one of the newborns. In the north Italian city of Parma, Laura Hynes Jenkins found that working-class parents preferred girls over boys.

Contributor Dominic J. Rossi finds a clear pattern of a preference for girls in the French town of Villeneuve-sur-Lot after 1650.

Rossi—one of the five former students who contributes to the book—posits the idea that "the lower-status families would want to marry their daughters up at the same time as economic conditions allowed them to make long-term plans for social movement."

Meanwhile Evan Johnson, another contributor, finds evidence to demonstrate that upper-class parents in rural Mézin showed a clear preference for keeping newborn males.

Infanticide within the contemporary

"Death Control in the West 1500-1800" shines a light on the many infants whose existence went unrecorded and whose deaths remained unpunished.

Hanlon calls attention to lax punitive measures taken for crimes of infanticide, and notes, "Tribunals operated against single mothers almost exclusively, but only if they killed the newborn deliberately. Simple abandonment was not a comparable offense."

The roles of the state and criminal justice system are rigorously

examined in the study, alongside realities of poverty and social class structures. The book draws parallels between histories of infanticide and present discussions of reproductive rights.

"Infanticide is murder, of course, but people did not consider this murder to be a crime," explains Hanlon, who says "most people could live with it as an unpleasant fact of life."

Together, Hanlon and his contributors invite readers to reckon with infanticide beyond a moralistic approach, in order to understand the social practice's ramifications for our present times.

More information: Gregory Hanlon, *Death Control in the West 1500–1800*, (2022). [DOI: 10.4324/9781003289784](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003289784)

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