

ABNORMALLY HIGH BAPTISMAL SEX RATIO DURING 1568-1600

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The parish register of Oakford, Mid-Devon begins in 1568 and shows no obvious signs of slipshod maintenance thereafter. But as the totals in Table 1 show, the ratio of male to female baptisms during 1568-1600 was 1.67, surely impossibly high as a reflection of the actual birth ratio.

Table 1. Baptisms by sex¹.

Period	Male	Female	Total
1568-1570	9	9	18
1571-1580	55	32	87
1581-1590	61	36	97
1591-1600	35	19	54
1568-1600	160	96	256

1. E. W. Bentley, *Oakford: the history of a Devon Parish*, Oakford, 1982.

Also, over the same period, no more than sixteen children are recorded as having died within twelve months of birth, giving an infant mortality rate of only 62.5 per 1000: and this too, seems unacceptable for the sixteenth century.

A possible explanation here however is that a number of children died before they were baptised. Moreover to lift the infant mortality rate for 1568 to 1600 to the more acceptable level (114 per 1000) revealed by the Oakford register for the period 1651 to 1700, for example, it would be necessary to postulate no more than fifteen such unrecorded deaths — only one for every two years.

On the other hand, many more than fifteen unrecorded deaths would have had to occur to restore respectability to the male/female birth ratio for 1568-1600, and they would have had to be all female at that. This in turn could only have arisen with the wilful connivance of parents. The question therefore is whether encouraging female children to die in early infancy was practised in Oakford in the late sixteenth century or whether the data quoted above are the result of rather peculiarly inefficient recording. An examination of baptismal sex ratios for the period in other registers might well suggest an answer.