Imagine the scene, imagine the hope and glory, imagine the pomp and circumstance. On 31 August 1566, Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603) entered the city of Oxford for her celebrated one-week visit, remaining until the 6 September. Her Majesty lodged at neighbouring Christ Church, but Corpus Christi College Fellows were among the most active in lauding the monarch. Or at the very least, more such praise is extant in the CCC Library than in other college libraries.

To our good fortune, the CCC library serves as the custodian to MS 280, which includes a compilation of materials relevant to the College’s history during the 16th century. Within that large collection are thirty-two pages (fols. 171-186) with fifty-six poems and praises, written by thirty-seven individuals, addressed to Her Majesty to celebrate her visit. Among the authors are several well-known Corpus Christi fellows, including George Napier, the brothers Edmond Rainolds and John Rainolds, Thomas Twyne, and Miles Windsor.

As one might expect, most of the poems are in Latin, but several are in Greek, and most striking of all is a poem by Edward Burdon in Hebrew. We know of only two other Hebrew compositions to honour Her Majesty, both of them (one in prose, the other in poetry) written by Thomas Neale (of New College), which today are preserved in Bodleian MS 13, Part I. Two eyewitness accounts – both by Corpus Christi Fellows – imply that there were Hebrew verses beyond the ones penned by Neale and Burdon, though all such compositions appear to be lost.

The highlight of the Queen’s visit to Oxford was her arrival at St Mary’s University Church on Tuesday, 3 September. The aforementioned Miles Windsor wrote as follows: “As the Quene entred into the Churche theare weare dyvers sheetes of verses in Lattyn, Greeke, & Ebhewe set vpon the doones & walles.” Richard Stephens left a shorter overall account, but he made the same observation, and added this interesting aside: “As the Quene entred into the Churche there were diverse shedes of verses in Greeke, Lattyn and Hebrew set vpon the dore & walles of the saide Churche.”

To repeat our opening sentence: Imagine the scene, imagine the hope and glory, imagine the pomp and circumstance – and imagine the number of Hebrew compositions which may have adorned Oxford generally and/or the Church specifically on that day. And yet all that remains are Neale’s poem, his prose encomium, and Burdon’s poem (found in CCC MS 280, fol. 175v).

What do we know about Edward Burdon? He was born in County Durham c. 1540, entered Corpus Christi College in 1558, and was called a B.A. in 1561, and then completed his M.A. degree on 19 December 1566. This chronology means, of course, that Burdon was still relatively young and in fact still engaged in his studies at Corpus Christi when Queen Elizabeth’s visit took place in 1566.

As is well known, Corpus remained a centre of Catholic fervour, at least until 1568, when the ‘conversion’ (for lack of a better term) to an officially Protestant institution took hold. To be sure, Burdon would have been one of the Catholic Fellows at Corpus Christi during Her Majesty’s visit. His religious affiliation, however, did not deter Burdon from expressing praise for the Queen in three (!) languages. For in addition to the Hebrew poem, Burdon also wrote elegies in Latin and in Greek (also preserved in CCC MS 280). As such, Burdon stands as a stellar instantiation of Corpus Christi’s founding earlier in the sixteenth century, with its famous biblioteca irlanda, to use Erasmus’s oft cited and yet always felicitous expression. In fact, could there be any better illustration of the College’s mission than that which emanates from the writings of this early Corpusce?

As scholars of ancient and medieval Hebrew, our main interest is in Burdon’s Hebrew poem, which we will publish for the first time ever in The Bodleian Library Record, forthcoming in 2024, along with copious annotations and a detailed linguistic analysis. To be sure, Burdon’s Hebrew is not eloquent, and the grammar is riddled with mistakes. Nonetheless, the poem stands as remarkable testimony to the discovery of the Hebrew language by Oxford dons and divines during the Tudor period. Here it is important to recall that there were no Jews in England during the period of 1290-1656, so that the fellows and students in Oxford and Cambridge could learn the ancient language only from grammar books and dictionaries written on the continent, mainly by German scholars who in fact did learn Hebrew from their Jewish neighbours.

It truly has been a pleasure to work on Burdon’s poem, and to discover more about his personal life, about the academic atmosphere at Corpus Christi during the sixteenth century, and of course about Queen Elizabeth I’s visit to Oxford in 1566. The trail of academic research always leads one down unexplored paths and into unanticipated terrain. In the present instance, the existence of Neale and Burdon’s Hebrew compositions reopened the question: to what extent did the Queen know Hebrew?

The only direct piece of evidence is the single comment by the Italian scholar Giulio Cesare Paschalli, who dedicated his De’ sacri salmi di Davide (Geneva, 1592) to Queen Elizabeth I. In the celebratory poem at the beginning of the volume, Paschalli mentions her ability in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin (in that order), in addition to Italian, German, French, and Spanish. One further indirect piece of evidence is the fact that the then still Princess Elizabeth was tutored by Antoine Rodolphe Chevallier, who had studied Hebrew on the continent and who one day would rise to the position of Regius Professor of Hebrew (Cantab.).

We know for sure that Chevallier taught Elizabeth French, and perhaps other European languages, so it is not hard to imagine him teaching her Hebrew as well. (As an aside, as Chevallier also tutored Thomas Bodley in Hebrew!) Herewith our translation of Burdon’s poem, which is overly literal at times, as we attempt to capture his sometimes clumsy and yet always expressive Hebrew verse.

I am not ashamed to put my folly in poems, for you.
Made in Hebrew, because there are commentators of me.
My instruction, as it were, I will declaim with my lack.
Not with pride, but rather to express my soul.
For this is our Queen, the one who brings my joy.
Thus, not payment, but rather truth, I receive.
God desires this way, (for me) to indite, and I strike.
Before writing, and the grace of the LORD.
In order that he may give to you the skins of your foes.
And may he strike them all, may you arise (over) your enemies.
Indeed, a continual wonder, unto under your feet.
He is humble forever, and he overtakes you unto the sea.
For without my ability, (my) wish ceases.
God desires this way, (for me) to indite, and I strike.
For without my ability, (my) wish ceases.
Before writing, and the grace of the LORD.
In order that he may give to you the skins of your foes.
And may he strike them all, may you arise (over) your enemies.
Indeed, a continual wonder, unto under your feet.
He is humble forever, and he overtakes you unto the sea.
The Name of Jacob, and also to you he gives life.
And length of days forever, and unto your heirs.
From his Holy-Place may he send-forth, and may he grant according to your heart.
And may he remember your offerings and your treasuries.
Every thing may he fulfill, peace and goodness upon you.
May he grant (you) and may he advance you the blessings of his grace.
Which his desire may not have done until now.
Amen and amen.
Long live the Queen!