



HEBRAICA & JUDAICA

Corpus holds a collection of 13 Hebrew manuscripts that is of profound significance in the field. According to the 19th-century library catalogues (Coxe 1852 and Kitchin 1867), Corpus had the largest collection of manuscripts of all kinds, and the second highest number of Hebrew manuscripts at that date.

Historical and cultural importance

Written in 12th-century England, these manuscripts provide unprecedented evidence of the intellectual contacts between Jews and Christians, and illustrate the early history of the Jews in England before their expulsion in 1290.

At the core of this collection are seven Biblical manuscripts, given to the College in 1536 by the first President of Corpus, John Claymund. One manuscript, a bilingual psalter (MS 10), contains an epistle most probably composed by theologian and Hebraist, Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln, in which he sets out the rationale for providing Latin-Hebrew manuscripts with a superscript translation (known in modern scholarship as 'Lincoln superscript'). Another manuscript with parts of Rashi's commentary to the Prophets and Hagiographa (MS 6) has an idiosyncratic vocalisation of the Hebrew which allows users to look into the 13th-century classroom and hear how Christian students pronounced the Hebrew.

In addition to these, the collection also contains a one-of-its-kind Ashkenazic prayer book. Since it can be dated before 1200, this is the earliest preserved siddur from Northern Europe. The book contains virtually the only evidence of Judaeo-Arabic being used in the British Isles during the entire Middle Ages.

Material of special significance

Corpus Christi was the first college in Oxford to make official provision for the study of Hebrew since its foundation. The College's Fellow John Shepreve (1530s) is considered the first Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford. In the early 17th century, Corpus Fellows used many items from the College library whilst participating in the translation of the King James Bible. During WWII Corpus showed a great solidarity with the plight of the Jews suffering from persecution and became home to prominent Jewish scholars of the 20th century. Hebrew and Jewish Studies remain core to Corpus' academic mission to this day: we are one of the few colleges to host a Professorial Fellow in the subject (Professor Judith Olszowy-Schlanger) and we accept postgraduates in the field.

Urgent conservation needs

Corpus' strategic objective of advancing education, learning and research for the public benefit is inextricably entwined with care for its Special Collections. The Hebraica and Judaica Collection is our utmost priority due to Corpus' strong and historic connection with Hebrew and Jewish studies, and the collection's conservation needs.

The physical condition of the material is stable, but in much need of conservation assessment and treatment, ranging from minor cleaning to more major textblock or binding repairs. Although all the Hebrew manuscripts are in bespoke, acid-free card boxes, these require updating and replacing with cloth phase boxes for longer-term protection. The early printed Hebraica and Judaica is not currently boxed, and this is a priority.