

## ***Braveheart* (1995). Leprosy: A Stigmatizing Disease**

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### Summary

The film is a hymn to freedom, the freedom of individuals and entire peoples. It narrates the life of the Scots hero, William Wallace, who lived during the last decades of the 13th century and the first years of the 14th century. These were turbulent times in the history of Scotland, which was subject to the power of the King of England, its neighbour, who governed with an iron hand while the members of the Scots nobility competed and fought for the succession to the throne of Scotland, which had been left vacant.

*Keywords:* Leprosy, Film, William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, Lepers, Wars of Scottish Independence 13<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### Technical details

**Title:** *Braveheart*

**Country:** USA

**Year:** 1995

**Director:** Mel Gibson

**Music:** James Horner

**Photography:** John Toll

**Film editor:** Steven Rosenblum

**Screenwriter:** Randall Wallace

**Cast:** Mel Gibson, James Robinston, Sean Lawlor, Sandy Nelson, James Cosmos, Sean McGinley, Alan Tall, Andrew Weir, Gerda Stevenson, Ralph Riach, Mhairi Calvey, Brian Cox, Patrick McGoohan, Peter Hanly, Sophie Marceau, Stephen Billington, Barry McGovern, Angus Macfadyen, John Kavanagh, Alun Armstrong, Catherine McCormack, Brendan Gleeson, Tommy Flanagan and Ian Bannen.

**Color:** Color

**Runtime:** 177 minutes

**Genre:** Action, Biography, Drama, War

**Production Companies:** Icon Productions, Ladd Company, Twentieth Century Fox and B.H. Finance C.V.

**Synopsis:** "Biopic" of the Scottish hero William Wallace (end of the 13<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

**Awards:** Oscar (1995) for Best Film (Mel Gibson, Alan Ladd Jr., Bruce Davey), Director (Mel Gibson), Photography (John Toll), Make-up (Peter Framptom, Paul Pattison, Lois Burwell) and Sound Effects (Lon Bender, Per Hallberg). Nominated for the Oscar for Best Costume Design, Film Editing, Original Score, Sound and Screenplay.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112573>

### The Film

*Braveheart* is one of those films that leave no spectator indifferent. It does not use a complicated philosophical approach, and anyone can understand its message: life without love and freedom is not life.

The action begins in 1280. William Wallace (Mel Gibson, as a boy played by James Robinston) is a boy who lives in a small village and who by chance witnesses a nightmarish scene: all the unarmed Scots nobles who had met with the English, supposedly to negotiate peace, appear hanged.

The Scots naturally wish to avenge their deaths. Malcolm (Sean Lawlor) and John (Sandy Nelson), the father and older brother of William, die at the hands of the invader during these clashes.

William, awaiting their return, sees his neighbours returning with a cart carrying their bodies.

The orphaned William is taken in by his father's brother, a cleric, and moves to Dundee. There he receives an education and has the opportunity to accompany his uncle on journeys to other European cities.

William Wallace returns to his village (Figure 1) some years later for a wedding celebration, but the fun is cut short by the appearance of English soldiers who come to take the bride to spend a night with their Lord, who claims his right to *jus primae noctis* that the king of England, Edward I (Patrick McGoohan), has reinstated.



Figure 1: William Wallace (Mel Gibson)

Wallace falls in love with Murrion (Catherine McCormack, as a young girl played by Mhairi Calvey) (Figure 2) whom he has known since childhood, and she corresponds this love. They marry in secret so that the English lord cannot take his first night rights.

One day the English soldiers are in the market village of Lanarck and an officer tries to rape Murrion. Wallace comes to the rescue and after attacking the perpetrators finds a horse for Murrion to flee on and tries to do the same. He manages to escape and believes that Murrion has done so as well, only to find that the English Sheriff of the area has cut her throat to oblige William to come back and seek vengeance.

After this bout of death and injustices, Wallace can no longer be a peaceful citizen who wishes to marry, have a family and work his lands. We wit-

ness the uprising of a people with less and less to lose who have now found a leader to fight against the tyranny of the English King Edward I, who for many years has been obsessed with dominating Scotland by any means. We are also privy to the doubts, intrigues and betrayals of the Scots nobility, more concerned with their disputes over the succession to the throne and with accumulating lands and wealth than with fighting for the independence of their country.



Figure 2: Murrion (Catherine McCormack)

Wallace defeats the English at Stirling (Figure 3) and begins the invasion of England. After several victories, however, he returns after hearing of Edward I's plans for attacking Scotland from the north and the west. William is defeated at Falkirk, but with a small group of men still manages to carry on the fight against the English, keeping alive the flame of rebellion. He is finally taken prisoner owing to the betrayal of the father (Ian Bannen) of the young Robert the Bruce and is executed in a savage and extremely cruel manner.

Nevertheless, the seeds of freedom and justice he has sown now grow among many Scots, even in Robert the Bruce (Angus Macfadyen), who as King Robert I (Figure 4), roundly defeats the English on the fields of Bannockburn, achieving the independence of Scotland.

The film *Braveheart* is much more than the brief summary given here: it is a succession of impressive scenes of mediaeval war, of tender love scenes; it is a magnificent portrayal of the age, it is the music, the landscape, the photography, and the sensation of reality that it transmits, making us sometimes



Figure 3: The Battle of Stirling. English Army

wish we were there with Wallace at Falkirk or with the Bruce in Bannockburn so that we could also give the invader what he deserved.

Of course, as soon as the film came out discordant voices emerged in an effort to discredit and disparage the film for its discrepancies with history, which as we shall see are important ones, but do not detract from the film’s great merit. Even if all the names of the characters were different and it took place in a different country, we would continue to admire the man who fought for the freedom of his people, spurned the riches that some tried to bribe him with and who was capable of crying “Freeeeedom!” when the majority were still humbly whispering “Your Grace”.

Randall Wallace, who wrote the screenplay, confessed that he had read the poem about Wallace written by Blind Harry in 1470 (figure 5). It was writ-



Figure 4: Robert I the Bruce (Angus Macfadyen)

ten almost two centuries after William Wallace’s birth and based on oral tradition. He liked it so much he decided to tell the story of the life of the poem’s hero, possibly without verifying all of the facts.

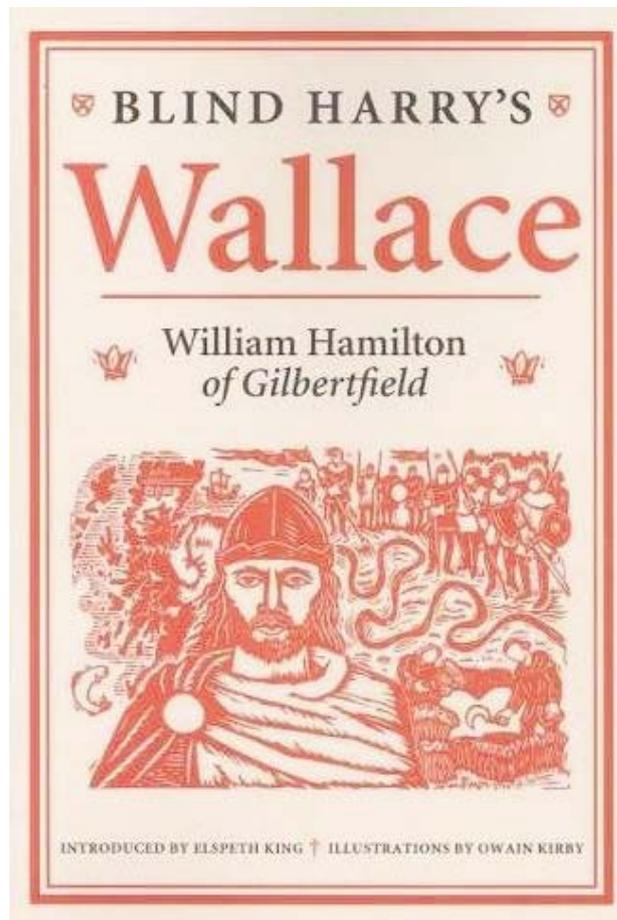


Figure 5: Cover of Wallace by Blind Harry

### Leprosy in *Braveheart*

There are two characters in this film who are not among the main characters but who actually were protagonists in real life, Robert VII the Bruce, who would later become King Robert I of Scotland, and his father, Robert VI the Bruce, Lord of Annandale, who died of leprosy. The father’s role is impressive. He only appears in four scenes; in each one we can see the progression of the disease (Figure 6) and in all four scenes he gives an authentic lesson in political Machiavellianism as well as in paternal love, as he leads his son along the difficult road to the throne of Scotland, which had been his own great ambition before falling ill.

From the ethical point of view the character is more than reprehensible, but he draws our attention



Figure 6: Evolution of the leprosy of Robert Bruce *The Leper* (Ian Bannen) in different scenes of the film

both for his leprosy, always such a mysterious and frightening disease, and for his skill for intrigue and machination.

He is the victim of a self-imposed isolation in what seems to be a tower of the castle, and his son goes to see him whenever he needs his advice, but these visits are short and they have no physical contact. He appears covered in a large cape and the parts of his body that the cape does not cover are swathed in bandages; the room in the tower in which he works is also separated by gauzes and curtains.

#### Main discrepancies between history and the film<sup>1-5</sup>

These discrepancies cannot be overlooked as they caused much criticism of the film on the part of those who do not understand that a film is never the same as a history book, nor does it try to be. History books are sold in bookshops or read in libraries; films are made to move and excite the spectator and can only serve collaterally to awaken some to an interest in history.

The beginning of the film is set in 1280, an unlikely date, because at that time Alexander III reigned in Scotland and the country was at peace with its neighbours. William Wallace's father died in 1291 and William was then nineteen years old, his mother was still alive and he had a younger brother, hence he did not become an orphan when he was eight, as depicted in the film.

As the scenes succeed each other we see the wedding in London of the heir of Edward I, his son the future Edward II, with Isabella of France (Figure 7), called the "She-Wolf of France". This wedding took place in 1308 in Boulogne and Edward I had already died.

Isabella could never have acted as the envoy of the King of England to negotiate peace with

Wallace nor could there have ever been a romance between them as seen in the film. When Wallace attacked England, Isabella was five years old, and Wallace was executed three years before she married Edward II.

The legend about a romantic relationship between William Wallace and a French princess perhaps came about in reference to Princess Margaret "The Pearl of France", who was the second wife of Edward I and does not appear as a character in the film.



Figure 7: Isabella of France (Sophie Marceau)

Wallace's relationship with Murrion, and the circumstances in which she died as a victim of the Sheriff of Lanarck (Figure 8) and was later avenged by Wallace do not seem to have any foundation in historical fact, but rather are the result of the popular imagination.

It is also striking that at the Battle of Stirling Bridge the bridge does not appear in the film, since it was tactically decisive for the Scots victory.

After Wallace took the city of York, we have a scene in which Edward I is shown throwing his son's



Figure 8: Wallace kills the man who executed Murrin

friend out the window. Although it is never stated in the film, this friend may have been Piers Gaveston, who, although exiled by Edward I, survived him to become the favourite of King Edward II during the first years of his reign.

Historically, the betrayal of William Wallace to hand him over to the English does not seem to have been plotted by the father of Robert I, as the film clearly states. There is evidently a whole series of scenes that takes place between Wallace’s capture and his execution that lacks any basis in reality.

Finally, there are also some discrepancies as to the true personality of three of the characters: Edward I, his son Edward II and Robert I the Bruce.

According to some English chroniclers, Edward I (Figure 9) was a great king. He set up a parliamentary system, conquered Wales and Ireland, and also loved his wife deeply. But the atrocities that appear in the film do not seem to have been exaggerated, since, for example, the executions of Robert I’s three brothers actually took place, as did the execution and quartering of Wallace, all of which suggests



Figure 9: Edward I (Patrick McGeehan)

that his cruel behaviour in Scotland is not overstated in the film.

The portrayal of Edward II was not well received in England either (Figure 10), because of how he is presented, but most sources agree that he preferred light entertainment over his state obligations and that he maintained a homosexual relationship with Gaveston, which brought him no end of trouble.



Figure 10: Edward II (Peter Hanly)

Everything possible is done in the film to extol the virtues of Robert VII the Bruce, Robert I of Scotland (Figure 11). He is presented as a friend and ally of Wallace, when in reality he was not. At the Battle of Falkirk, where he fought on the side of the English, he is gratuitously presented as saving Wallace’s life, while any reference to the murder of Comyn has been left out. This is surely because the people that forged his legend pardoned him for his subsequent actions<sup>1-5</sup>.

**Curiosities regarding the real story**

Although it is not within the scope of this article to make a study of the history of Scotland during the years depicted in the film, so many noteworthy and curious events took place then that it is impossible not to mention some of them.

It will give us an historical framework from which to better understand the film, at the same time allowing us to appreciate why the scriptwriter employed a certain amount of poetic licence to make “his” story more cinematographic and to a certain extent more moving for the spectator.



Figure 11: Robert I (Angus Macfadyen)

In 1286, King Alexander III reigned in Scotland and the country was experiencing one of the most prosperous moments in its history thanks to the wool trade with Europe. It was also an independent nation that lived in peace with neighbouring England.

One night in March of that year, Alexander attended a meeting with his cabinet in Edinburgh Castle (Figure 12). It was a dark, stormy night, but Alexander wished to return to his young second wife, Yoland; he started on his way home and took a short-cut full of cliffs and crags and fell to his death.

He had been married to the sister of Edward I of England, with whom he had three sons, all of

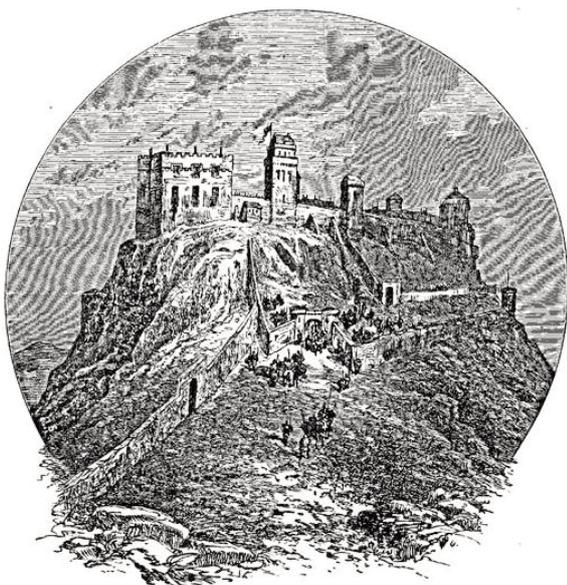


Figure 12: Edinburgh Castle before 1573 (Illustration taken from Grant J. Cassell's *Old and New Edinburgh*, Vol.1, Londres: Cassell & Co; 1880s)

whom died early. He remarried only four months before his death. His granddaughter, Margaret, not even three years old, was the heir to the throne of Scotland.

On 2 April, 1286, the magnates of the realm met in Scone, and discussion arose over whether a female could reign in Scotland or not. Robert V the Bruce was one of those who opposed that possibility, and put himself forward as a claimant for the throne. When everything seemed to indicate that the meeting was about to turn into a dispute, Queen Yoland arrived to tell them that she was expecting the posthumous child of King Alexander. The magnates agreed to wait for the child's birth. Although the child did not come to term, things calmed down and Edward I entered the scene.

At this time Edward I (Figure 13) was King of England and he signed the Treaty of Birgham, by which he agreed to marry his heir to Margaret. Two independent kingdoms would still exist, without either having supremacy over the other; however, his true intentions can be seen in the fact that it was also agreed that some English garrisons would be established in Scotland. In September, 1290, on her way from Norway to Scotland, Margaret, the "Maid of Norway" died, and the marriage that had been agreed upon never took place.

Thus, a long process began with almost fourteen Scots nobles claiming the throne, although soon only two claimants remained, John Balliol and Robert V the Bruce, grandfather of the young Robert who was to become King of Scotland. In this long process,



Figure 13: Edward I (Illustration taken from Cassell's *History of England*. Century Edition. Published circa 1902)

which came to be known as “The Great Cause” and which lasted two years, Edward I was asked to arbitrate. Each of the claimants was to name forty jurors and Edward I, twenty-four.

Edward demanded that the claimants had to swear allegiance to him, or else he would not act as arbitrator.

John Balliol (Figure 14) was chosen, possibly because Edward though he would be easier to subjugate. A short time later, in November, 1292, John Balliol was crowned king at Scone Abbey.

Robert V the Bruce then ceded his title of Lord of Annandale and his right to succeed to the throne to his son Robert VI the Bruce, who is the king suffering from leprosy in the film *Braveheart*. He was born in 1250 and by marriage was also the Count of Carrick. Legend has it that during the Eighth Crusade (1270-1274) his comrade in arms, Adam of Kilconath, died in a skirmish and Robert returned to take the sad



Figure 14: John Balliol and his wife (taken from *Four Gothic Kings*, Elizabeth Hallam, ed.)

news to Adam’s widow, Marjorie Countess of Carrick. She was so taken with him that she took him prisoner in her castle until he agreed to marry her, and that is how he became the Count of Carrick.

Edward I tried to impose certain conditions on John Balliol, among which that the King of Scotland would be a vassal of the king of England, all lawsuits between the two nations would be judged by English judges with English laws and Scotland would contribute men and money whenever England went to war with a third party. Not even an accommodating person as Balliol could accept such conditions; he refused to do so and attacked the English garrisons in Scotland and even in the north of England after signing a treaty with France. However, Edward I of England defeated the Scots army in 1296, captured King John and took him to the tower of London as a prisoner. Scotland, with no army and no king, was now at the mercy of the English.

In the spring of 1297, under a situation of oppression, injustice and cruelty on the part of the invaders, William Wallace’s uprising, the focal point of the film *Braveheart*, took place (Figure 15). Wallace was a commoner, and therefore there are not many documents written about him. He is believed to have been born in January, 1272 in Elerslie (now Elderslie), the second of the three sons of Malcolm Wallace, a commoner according to some sources, or a lower ranking noble with his own lands according to others.

His early years took place in a peaceful, independent country that was relatively prosperous. At



Figure 15: William Wallace (print from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century)

successive stages of his life he received an education in Latin, languages and above all in theology and other Church matters. It was the custom of the time for a second son, who would not inherit land, to have a career in the Church, and William also had some uncles who were clerics. It seems he was in Stirling with one of his father's brothers, almost certainly in Paisley with one of his mother's brothers, and in Dundee. He also traveled to Rome and to France. His father seems to have died 1291 in a skirmish with the English in Irvine; the English were in Scotland for the Great Cause and it was then, at age 19, that William abandoned his studies and returned home. Not long after the death of his father, Wallace seems to have gone to Dundee and had a fight with the son of the governor of the castle, then occupied by an English garrison, and killed him. The man's name was Selby. He was then declared an outlaw and a price was put on his head. More or less at the same time that John Balliol was crowned king, Wallace was forced to hide in the woods of the north.

Some authors mention his marriage to Murrion (which they write as Marion) some time later, but there is no agreement as to this. Those who believe this marriage took place also believe that the Sheriff of Lanark, Hazelrig, ordered Murrion killed in order to capture Wallace and that then Wallace, accompanied by a small band of Scots, killed the Sheriff and many English soldiers. This can be considered the moment of the uprising in 1297.

In the northeast of Scotland a noble named Andrew Murray had also risen up against the English. Murray and Wallace attacked and conquered Dundee Castle. In September they defeated the English at the Battle of Stirling Bridge (Figure 16), and shortly afterwards, both men, William y Andrew, were named Guardians of Scotland and Wallace was made a knight. Andrew Murray died in November, 1297, from what were likely to be wounds taken at the Battle of Stirling Bridge, leaving William as the only Guardian of Scotland. He decided to attack England.

The Scots nobles, with King John imprisoned in London, carried on with their disputes over the succession to the throne and did not give Wallace support. Wallace defeated the English several times but had to return to Scotland because Edward I, who had just returned from France, was going to attack him. In June, 1298, the English king moved to the north with 25,000 men on foot and more than 2,000 on horseback and on 21 June defeated Wallace at



Figure 16: Stirling Castle (photograph by Finlay McWalter, 2002)

Falkirk. Wallace seems to have been betrayed by some Scots. His tactic had consisted in keeping supplies away from the English, and in fact the English army was low in morale and suffering from malnutrition, and in a mood propitious for rebellion. Wallace and his army, much smaller than the English one, tried to avoid confrontations. The betrayal consisted in revealing to Edward that Wallace was with his army thirty kilometers outside Falkirk. Whether or not the retreat of the Scots cavalry was premeditated or the result of an enormous numerical disadvantage is still polemical. After his defeat at Falkirk, Wallace never again led a large army, but with his most faithful men he continued to harass the English, keeping alive the flame of rebellion against them.

Robert VII The Bruce is believed to have supported Wallace at the Battle of Stirling Bridge, although his father did not. The former was later pardoned by Edward, who took it as a whim of youth, and then he swore loyalty to the king and was by his side and against the Scots patriots in Falkirk. Edward attempted to conquer Scotland after his victory at Falkirk, but after another minor victory he was forced to return to England with his decimated and exhausted army to sign a truce.

In 1299, a Regency Council was appointed in the name of John Balliol, consisting of John Comyn, a nephew of Balliol, Robert the Bruce, Count of Carrick and the Bishop of Saint Andrews, William of Lamberton, a personal friend of William Wallace. Robert was on this Council because Balliol wanted to ensure his cooperation in getting his nephew John Comyn to succeed him as king. But in 1304, during Edward I's campaign in which he took back Stirling Castle, Robert was by his side. Edward tried to secure the friendship of Robert the Bruce, but the latter's

father died during this year and the young Bruce seemed to decide that he preferred to fight for the Crown of Scotland and the independence of his nation instead of the English lands that Edward was promising him in compensation for his friendship.

The fall of Stirling Castle was followed by the capture and execution of William Wallace in August, 1305. Shortly afterwards, Robert made a pact with Lamberton so that the latter could get him the support he needed to confront England. On 10 February, 1306, Bruce met with Comyn in a church in Dumfries, but Comyn refused to support his plans for rebellion against England. In the heat of the argument, Bruce took out a dagger and killed Comyn on the high altar (Figure 17).



Figure 17: The death of Comyn

His pact with Bishop Lamberton helped him to become crowned King of Scotland on 27 March of that same year at Scone Abbey, but he remained a king without a realm. Edward responded to this challenge immediately and in June of the same year, 1306, defeated Bruce at Methven, forcing him to flee to the island of Ruthlin. The women of his family were confined in Kildrummy and three of his brothers were executed. On his return to Scotland he began a guerilla war against the English garrisons and little by little gained supporters. Edward, old and infirm, led a great army towards Scotland, but on 7 June, 1307 he died without making great advances. His dying wish was for his bones to be carried at the head of his army until the Scots were totally defeated. His son, Edward II, was supposed to carry on with the war, but he went to Cummock in Ayrshire and returned without firing a

single arrow, leaving the decisions in the hands of his generals.

Edward II (Figure 18) was the son of Edward I of England and his wife, Eleanor of Castile, whom he had married at the Monastery of Las Huelgas on 1 November, 1254. They had 16 children, and Edward was the eldest of the ones who survived. Edward II did not inherit his father's aptitude either for war or for affairs of state, and leaving to one side his sexual orientation, he was much more given to light entertainment than to the difficult task of heading a kingdom. He delegated almost all his obligations to his favorites and advisors Little by little, Robert I (Figure 19) was winning small battles and recovering forts in different parts of the country, until his victory at Bannockburn on 24 June, 1314. During the period between 1314 and 1329, the Scottish monarchy and the independence of Scotland became consolidated.

He died of leprosy in 1329. According to tradition, when he realized he was dying he told Sir James Douglas, his friend and lieutenant, of his wish that his heart be cut out and taken to the Holy Land to fight against the Mohammedans, in order to atone for his sins (he had been excommunicated for murdering John Comyn), since he believed that his disease was a punishment for them. James Douglas died in the Battle of Teba in Andalusia, in which he participated under the command of King Alphonse XI. He had gone there with the heart of Robert I. The heart was then returned to Scotland and buried in Melrose Abbey.



Figure 18: Edward II (Illustration taken from Cassell's History of England. Century Edition. Published circa 1902)



Figure 19: Robert I of Scotland

### Leprosy as a stigmatizing disease

Leprosy is a disease with a very interesting history, one that has always fascinated more than most. We have a record of it going back more than 4000 years<sup>6</sup>. It is usually the disease that most draws children's attention owing to its appearance in Bible passages and the many historical and religious films that have been made, as well as to the evidence of its symptoms that are shown in these films.

According to some authors, leprosy would have made its first appearance in the Far East in pre-historic times, then arriving in India and later brought to the Near East and Egypt by Assyrians and Chaldeans. The Egyptians thought the arrival of the Israelites had brought the disease to Egypt but the Israelites believed they had caught the disease in Egypt during their period of captivity. Whatever the case, what is certain is that famous individuals of both these peoples suffered from leprosy, such as Pharaoh Thomses II and Moses. The Phoenicians, a trading and seafaring people, managed to spread it to Greece and other Mediterranean countries, and the Romans spread it throughout Europe.

Not all cases of leprosy in ancient times were actually leprosy. In Hebrew the word *Tsarath* or *Tzaraat* was used to designate a series of skin diseases that were considered a divine punishment for some kind of impurity or sin, and among these was leprosy<sup>7,9</sup>.

The Greeks distinguished between *leontiasis*, or lion face, and leprosy, the former being Hansen's disease and the latter a set of skin diseases such as psoriasis, vitiligo and some forms of acne. The trans-

lations of the Bible into Greek and of Greek medical texts from Arabic to Latin, since they arrived in the west thanks to the Arabs, created some confusion. This confusion regarding the terms, together with the diagnostic limitations, may mean that the cases of leprosy in mediaeval Europe could have included some cases of syphilis and other skin diseases<sup>7-9</sup>.

The fall of the Roman Empire entailed the disappearance of cities, which helped to improve the situation regarding infectious-contagious diseases, and for this reason leprosy became so important in this age. The Jewish diaspora, the Arab invasions and the Crusades, together with their evolution throughout time, increased the cases of leprosy until it became one of the most prevalent diseases<sup>7</sup>.

The isolation of lepers among the Israelites was one of the first public health measures ever taken, but because leprosy was related with the guilt or impurity of its victims it entailed their stigmatization, which lasted until the twentieth century. It must be recalled that after the destruction of the Roman Empire the transmission of culture and knowledge was left to the Church, and the Bible began to take on unbounded importance, with the result that lepers were still considered impure individuals who had received a punishment from God and should therefore be separated from society, losing all their rights.

A law of the Lombard King Rothair of the 7<sup>th</sup> century and subsequent ones of Pepin the Short and Charlemagne in the 8<sup>th</sup> century turned mediaeval lepers into the living dead, persons without rights or hope. For its part, the Church created leper colonies and helped to feed and assist these people, but its teachings and beliefs were at the bottom of these discriminatory measures. Lepers lost all their rights: they could not inherit, leave a will, buy or sell or even serve as witnesses. As regards marriage, beginning in 754 the disease was a cause for divorce and the loss of the goods held in common. Lepers could not enter churches, markets or mills or attend any gathering of persons; they could not wash their hands or clothes in any stream or leave their shelter without distinctive clothing. According to ecclesiastical ceremonials, they could not enter taverns in search of wine, have sexual relations except with their wife, converse with persons on the road unless from a distance, touch the ropes and posts of bridges without gloves or even go along the roads in the same direction as the wind. After death they had to be buried in their own home and not in holy ground<sup>9</sup>.

Leper colonies or lazarettos were created by the thousands in the Middle Ages, but were more a system of isolation and control than true hospitals. Entering one of these establishments was the same as being buried alive and was worse than roaming the roads and forests in spite of the prohibitions and of having to wear the distinctive clothing of a leper (Figure 20).



Figure 20: Isolation of Robert VI (Ian Bannen)

Between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, coinciding with the Crusades, leprosy became an epidemic in Europe and almost 15,000 lazarettos were created<sup>8</sup>. The fact that many caught the disease in the wars against the infidels stripped leprosy of its nature as a divine punishment, but not the ancestral fear of contagion. Paradoxically, leprosy now became associated with a certain air of holiness, but we must bear in mind that many of these cases diagnosed as leprosy could actually have been syphilis. In 1321 there was a leper uprising in France; they wanted to be able to live a normal life. King Phillip V repressed this uprising harshly, the lepers were accused of poisoning the water supply and those who confessed were burnt alive; others were simply murdered and the rest were subjected to measures of greater control and confinement than before<sup>7</sup>.

Although hygienists seem to agree that the gradual decrease in leprosy was due to the use of soap and underwear, which gradually extended over the years, there were other factors at the end of the Middle Ages that contributed to its abrupt decline.

As population centres grew, tuberculosis and other epidemic diseases reappeared and the number of

lepers declined rapidly. There exist different theories to explain this fact. One of them affirms that the lepers, who had fewer immunological defences than the rest, would easily fall victim to these other diseases. Some believe that tuberculosis could have acted as a kind of vaccine through cross immunity. Whatever the cause, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century the prevalence of leprosy in Europe had improved greatly<sup>9</sup>.

Leprosy was taken to America by the Spanish and Portuguese at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. As far as the situation of lepers was concerned, it had not improved as regards segregation and fear of contagion. To give an example of this situation, what follows is the transcription of a certificate issued by Ambrosio Paré<sup>6</sup>, a French surgeon of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the author of important advances in the surgery of that age:

*“We the surgeons of Paris, by order of the Procurator General of the King in le Chatelet, given on the 28<sup>th</sup> day of August of 1583, by which we have been named to determine if G.P. is a leper, have hereby examined him as follows: Firstly we have found a bluish green tint to his face, which is pallid and livid and full of blue blemishes, we have likewise pulled out hairs from his head, beard and eyebrows and we have seen that a small bit of flesh was attached to the root of the hair.*

*On his eyebrows and behind his ears we have found small granule tubercles, folds in the forehead and a fixed and immobile look with reddened bright eyes; the nasal orifices wide on the outside and narrow on the inside, almost closed, with small crusty ulcers; a swollen and blackened tongue and above and below it we found small pimples such as are seen in the “leperous” pig (referring to trichina), corroded gums and flaked teeth and a very penetrating breath, with a hoarse voice and speaking through the nose.*

*We have also seen him naked, and found his skin rough and uneven like that of a thin plucked goose and many skurf patches in certain places. We also stuck a needle into him quite deeply and many times without him hardly feeling it. Because these signs that are more univocal than equivocal, we have decided that the person called G.P. is a confirmed leper. He should therefore be separated from the company of healthy persons, since this disease is contagious.*

*We certify all of the above as true and place our hand signs (signatures) here as witnesses...”<sup>6</sup> (Figure 21).*

Although it is true that leper houses were places designed to segregate the diseased from the



Figure 21: The clinical form of leprosy in the film seems to be lepromatous

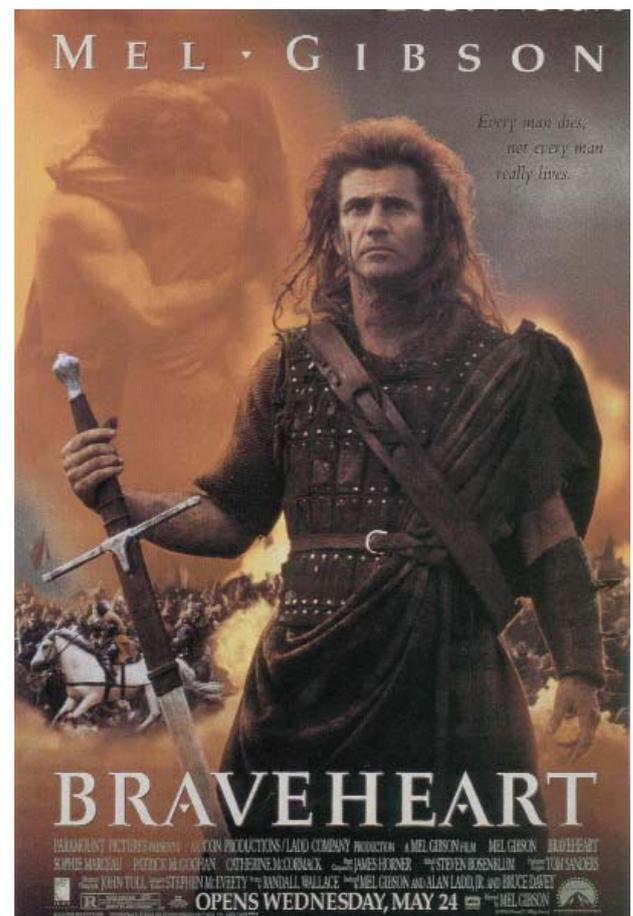
rest of the population and in some cases were hellish, there were other very prosperous and well-attended establishments which the ill and even the healthy paid to enter, as can be seen in the following certificate: *“In the year 1578 the Consuls have received in the hospital and lazaretto the one called Jehan Guiraud, attacked and declared ill with leprosy as reported by the illustrious Doctors of Medicine and master surgeons, having paid forty pounds (libras tornesas)”*.

Over the centuries knowledge of leprosy advanced little or not at all; at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the theory that leprosy was contagious was rejected, and it was thought that it could be transmitted by eating the meat of leprous animals or fish and the theory of a genetic inheritance was also considered. Daniel C. Danielssen himself, Hansen’s boss in the leper hospital in Bergen, Norway was one of the staunchest defenders of the hereditary theory, since he had inoculated himself with matter obtained from lepers and had not developed the disease.

In 1873, Gerhard Armauer Hansen, a Norwegian doctor, discovered the bacillus that causes leprosy, and in 1923, our understanding of the immunology of leprosy began with the work of Mitsuda, which revealed why few people are susceptible to the most serious clinical forms of the disease or even any of its forms. The myth of leprosy as highly contagious was banished forever. The cure would come later: after the first successes with the use of Dapsone in the 1940s, it was soon noticed that relapses were the norm; it was not until the 1980s that a polytherapeutic treatment with Dapsone, Rifampicine and Clofazimine was discovered to cure the disease definitively<sup>7-10</sup>.

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USA poster of William Wallace (Mel Gibson), the protagonist of the film

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