

Gentius (fl. 180 BC – 168 BC)

Based on the works of two natural history writers of the first century, Pliny and Dioscorides, it is generally accepted that the European alpine plant *Gentiana lutea*, and by extension the genera *Gentiana* and *Gentianella*, are named after Gentius, the last king of Illyria, who is thought to have discovered the medicinal properties of the herb. The bitter root of gentian species has long been an ingredient in herbalists' decoctions, and is still widely used in Europe in gastro-intestinal preparations, mostly combined with other herbs.

Legend has it that during the reign of Gentius, Illyria was devastated by plague. So great was the mortality among his subjects, the devout king declared a period of fasting, and prayed that if he shot an arrow into the air its descent would be guided to a herb possessed of sufficient virtue to arrest development of the disease. He shot the arrow, and in falling it cleft the root of a plant that was found to have amazing curative powers and did much to reduce the ravages of the plague. The plant from that time on became known as the gentian, in honour of the good king whose supplications brought about the divine manifestation of its medicinal properties.

History is more prosaic. Gentius (or Genthius) was the son of the Illyrian king Pleuratus II of the tribe of the Labeates, but it is not known when he was born or died. His mother's name was Eurydice, and he had two siblings, a brother named Plator and a half-brother Caravantius, born of the same mother. Illyria, a region in the western part of today's Balkan Peninsula (present-day northern Albania

and Montenegro) was inhabited by a diverse coalition of tribes, united to some extent by a common Illyrian language. The most important town was Scodra. In 180 BC Gentius assumed the throne and began a reign that was to last just fourteen years. The monarchy was established on hereditary lines, and Illyrian rulers used marriage as a means of alliance with other powers. It was reported in 169 BC that Gentius had his brother Plator put to death. Plator was betrothed to Etuta, the daughter of Monunius, a chief of the Illyrian tribe of the Dardanians, and marriage would have secured Plator the support of the Dardani. The fact that Gentius then married Etuta gave credibility to the conjecture that he was jealous as well as afraid of losing his political strength. He was not worried about being usurped by his half-brother, as the latter's father was of lowly birth.

With a volatile temper fuelled by wine, and Plator out of the way, Gentius harassed and oppressed his people. Abandoning the earlier alliance with Rome, he renewed relations with Macedonia and provoked war, plundering the fields of the peasants and laying siege to towns with populations friendly to Rome. The Romans retaliated, and in 168 BC, after less than a month of hostilities, Gentius was defeated at Scodra by a Roman force led by Anicius Gallus. Gentius and his entire family – his wife Etuta, their two sons Scerdilaedus and Pleuratus, his brother Caravantius and his mother Eurydice – were sent to Rome where they were paraded in the victor's triumph, and then interned. The Illyrian kingdom disintegrated, and by 167 BC Roman control had extended over the entire Balkan area.



Gentianella concinna

A revision in 2004 of the genus *Gentianella* recognised 30 species in New Zealand and 18 species and subspecies in Australia. Linnaeus retained the early eponym in 1753. *Gentianella concinna* ('neat, pretty, elegant') is a species of shaded habitats, mainly in low forest and less often in shaded places in tussock grassland, summit herbfields and coastal turflands, and is found only on the subantarctic Auckland Islands. Unlike most of our gentians, which have white to cream flowers, those of *Gentianella concinna* range from white to strong shades of red or purple, with purple veins. It is closely allied to *Gentianella cerina*, which occupies more open habitats on the Auckland Islands.