

The Legend of Cú Chulainn

As a young boy Setanta was told many stories about his uncle King Conor Mac Nessa, his Kingdom at Emhain Macha and the famous Macra. The Macra was set up by King Conor and was a training school for young boys to become future warriors in the king’s army. The Macra trained everyday to use weapons and challenged each other to games especially hurling as it was regarded as a game of great skill and speed.

Setanta longed to become a member of the Macra and at aged nine he set out with determination from his home on the Cooley Mountains for Emhain Macha. In his hands he carried items to shorten his journey, a hurley made out of brass, a sliotar made out of silver and a spear. Along the journey he would strike the silver sliotar with the brass hurl as hard as he could then throw the hurl and then the spear into the air after the sliotar and run to catch all three in succession without letting them hit the ground.

As Setanta arrived at Emhain Macha the boys of the Macra were playing hurling as King Conor looked on. Setanta rushed in to play, he beat every boy to the sliotar then dribbled, pucked and carried it on his hurl the length of the playing pitch and finally hit it unstopably into the goal. In a fit of anger at the intrusion, the boys charged at Setanta with their hurleys but he fought them all off, single-handedly!

The king, not recognising his young nephew, intervened and demanded to know who Setanta was? Setanta explained his story. King Conor was delighted to meet his nephew and remarked that if Setanta was half as good a warrior as he was a hurler then he would be a rare catch! Setanta’s dream came true when King Conor invited him to become a member of the Macra.

Shortly after joining the Macra Setanta was playing hurling when King Conor was passing on his way to a feast at the house of his blacksmith, Culann. He stopped to watch the boys playing and noticed that it was two teams playing as normal except that Setanta was playing on his own against the two teams! As a reward Conor invited Setanta to the feast, however Setanta explained that he couldn’t leave just yet as the game wasn’t finished. It was agreed that Setanta would follow Conor to Culann’s house after the game.

After the match Setanta set off for Culann’s fort with his hurl and sliotar to keep him amused on the journey. As he arrived at Culann’s fort he heard a great growl and saw a giant beast bounding towards him. When King Conor arrived at Culann’s fort he had forgotten about his invitation to Setanta and Culann released his ferocious hound to protect the fort. Without a second thought and with all his speed and accuracy, Setanta hurled his sliotar into the hound’s gaping mouth and killed him instantly. Inside, the feast was interrupted by a ferocious howling. In horror King Conor remembered Setanta and believed his nephew to be torn to shreds by the mighty hound of Culann. King Conor and Culann rushed outside and were amazed to see Setanta alive and the hound dead.

King Conor was delighted to see his nephew alive and well, however Culann was upset that his mighty watchdog was dead. Seeing Culann’s distress at the loss of his hound Setanta offered Culann a deal. If Culann found another young dog Setanta would train the dog to be as magnificent as the one he had killed. In the meantime Setanta himself would defend Culann’s fort and be Culann’s watchdog.

Culann happily accepted this offer and Setanta was given the new name of Cú Chulainn, the hound (cú) of Culann. Eventually Setanta completed his promise to Culann but was known as Cú Chulainn until the day he died.

Curriculum Links

History. Strand – Story. Strand Unit – Stories.

History. Strand – Early People and Ancient Society. Strand Unit – The Celts.

Visual Arts. Strand – Drawing. Strand Unit – Making Drawings.



Cú Chulainn, The Táin and the Celts

The legend of Cú Chulainn is one of many interrelating stories that make up the Táin. The Táin was committed to written word in the 11th Century *Book of the Dun Cow*, the 12th Century *Book of Leinster* and the 14th century *Book of Lecan*. Historians, folklorists and archaeologists believe that the Táin is set in the Irish Iron Age. The Irish Iron Age dates from 500BC to 500AD and is characterised by the use of iron for weapons and tools. The people who lived in Ireland at the time were known as the Celts and lived a farming, clan-based lifestyle. Not only has the Táin provided us with Ireland’s greatest hero and hurler but also provides us with the evidence to date hurling to the Irish Iron Age.

At the GAA Museum

Take part in a Cú Chulainn history workshop.

Learn more about the ancient origins of hurling.

Design an Iron Age shield for Cú Chulainn

When Setanta joined the Macra he trained everyday to use weapons and defend himself in battle.

Shields were very important for a warrior on the battlefield as they prevented injuries.

Iron Age shields were long, light enough to carry but hard enough to defend against spears and swords.

An Iron Age shield was usually made of wood, covered in leather and had a central boss shaped like an upside down bowl in the centre of the front of the shield. This boss was to protect the hand that was holding the shield on the opposite side.

Warriors would decorate their shields in beautiful bright colours in swirls and circles similar to the patterns on this page.

Iron Age people loved decoration and often wore jewellery and bright colours to impress. Even the men wore big jewellery!

Get Creative

Use these patterns on the page as inspiration to **design a shield** that you think Cú Chulainn would have used going into battle.

Remember the more designs and colour on your shield the more impressive it will look going into battle!

